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Ernest A. Wente

WINE MAKING IN THE LIVERMORE VALLEY

With an Introduction by

Maynard A. Amerine

An Interview Conducted by
Ruth Teiser

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Ernest A. Wente with his grandsons Phillip (left) and Eric (right) and his son Karl L. Wente, 1954. Photograph by Elizabeth Vandermark.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

PREFACE	i
INTRODUCTION BY MAYNARD A. AMERINE	iii
INTERVIEW HISTORY	v
EARLY YEARS OF THE WENTE VINEYARD	1
CARL H. WENTE AND HIS CONTEMPORARIES	8
WINE MEN OF 1915 AND 1939	15
PRE-PROHIBITION DAYS	23
VINEYARD PROBLEMS AND SOLUTIONS	31
WINES BEFORE PROHIBITION AND AFTER	36
PROFITS AND LOSSES	41
TECHNIQUES AND TASTES	45
HERMAN L. WENTE AND THE WENTE FAMILY	50
CHANGES	56
THE PROHIBITION PERIOD	60
FACTORS AFFECTING THE EARLY REPEAL YEARS	63
THE PRORATE AND BURKE CRITCHFIELD	69
ECONOMIC TRENDS	71
DISTRIBUTION AND SALES	76
RECENT ADVANCES	80
GROWING GOOD WINE GRAPES	83
INDEX	92

(For Wines and Grapes see page 96)

PREFACE

The California Wine Industry Oral History Series, a project of the Regional Oral History Office, was initiated in 1969, the year noted as the bicentenary of continuous wine making in this state. It was undertaken through the action and with the financing of the Wine Advisory Board, and under the direction of University of California faculty and staff advisors at Berkeley and Davis.

The purpose of the series is to record and preserve information on California grape growing and wine making that has existed only in the memories of wine men. In some cases their recollections go back to the early years of this century, before Prohibition. These recollections are of particular value because the Prohibition period saw the disruption of not only the industry itself but also the orderly recording and preservation of records of its activities. Little has been written about the industry from late in the last century until Repeal. There is a real paucity of information on the Prohibition years (1920-1933), although some wine making did continue under supervision of the Prohibition Department. The material in this series on that period, as well as the discussion of the remarkable development of the wine industry in subsequent years (as yet treated analytically in few writings) will be of aid to historians. Of particular value is the fact that frequently several individuals have discussed the same subjects and events or expressed opinions on the same ideas, each from his own point of view.

Research underlying the interviews has been conducted principally in the University libraries at Berkeley and Davis, the California State Library, and in the library of the Wine Institute, which has made its collection of in many cases unique materials readily available for the purpose.

Three master indices for the entire series are being prepared, one of general subjects, one of wines, one of grapes by variety. These will be available to researchers at the conclusion of the series in the Regional Oral History Office and at the library of the Wine Institute.

The Regional Oral History Office was established to tape record autobiographical interviews with persons who have contributed significantly to recent California history. The office is headed by Willa K. Baum and is under the administrative supervision of James D. Hart, the Director of The Bancroft Library.

Ruth Teiser
Project Director
California Wine Industry
Oral History Series

1 March 1971
Regional Oral History Office
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University of California, Berkeley

INTRODUCTION

Ernest A. Wente was born on his father's ranch at Livermore in 1890. He attended local schools and the newly-established University Farm of the University of California at Davis. From graduation until now he has lived and farmed in Livermore.

The themes of particular interest are those that concern his father and the pre-Prohibition and Prohibition period, the growth of Wente Bros. wines since Repeal, and his own concerns with the problems of producing high quality wine grapes and wines.

Carl H. Wente, Ernest's father, appears here as a hard-working and forward-looking man. The original Wente vineyard, from 1883, appears to have been planted, in the main, with good varieties. This was made into sound wine and sold in bulk. Ernest Wente makes the useful point that at least four of the wines which got prizes at the 1915 fair originally came from his father's winery. He also recalls some "very, very lovely wines" from the pre-Prohibition period. Ernest Wente's recollections of early Livermore and San Francisco friends of his family are particularly valuable. The Wentes' associations with the Napa and Sonoma Wine Company and with Beaulieu are well delineated.

The growth of Wente Bros. as a wine bottle label and not a bulk-wine producer started after Repeal. Ernest and his brother, Herman, were responsible for this development. He also gives his brother Herman credit for helping to organize the Wine Institute after Repeal. He recalls this as a slow growth. However, it is of interest to note that Wente Bros. received one of the two Grand Prix at the Golden Gate International Exposition in 1939.

Throughout Ernest Wente's memoirs there are numerous indications of his abiding and basic interest in farming. The phylloxera problem before Prohibition and the virus problem after 1950 are well remembered. There is much information on cattle and grain growing. He is particularly clear about not over-cropping grapes, about the need of irrigation, about certified grape stocks and a number of other details of viticulture that escape many people. We are also indebted to him for revealing details of what he thinks about the quality of a number of varieties of grapes.

He also gives a number of details about wine making which help to explain the success of Wente Bros. wines: care of cooperage, value of stainless steel tanks, control of temperature, filtration, labels, corks, etc.

We find from these memoirs, what all those who have been associated with him already know, that Ernest Wente is a warm human being, proud of his associates and modest about his accomplishments.

Maynard A. Amerine
Professor, Viticulture and Enology

January 1971
101 Wickson Hall
University of California at Davis

INTERVIEW HISTORY

The interview with Ernest A. Wente was conducted in three sessions on April 18, April 21, and May 13, 1969, in Mr. Wente's office at the Wente Bros. winery, which is located among the fields and vineyards southeast of the town of Livermore. A quietly vigorous man of 79, Mr. Wente postponed one planned session because a pump had broken and he was out in the fields repairing it.

In the years since Repeal, a good deal has been written in the trade and general press about the Wente family winery. A suggested interview outline based upon published articles and some additional manuscript material was sent to Mr. Wente early in April, 1969. Although it was not followed chronologically, all the subjects in it were discussed, the sequence being determined in part by the interviewee's thought associations, in part by the interviewer's questions.

The initial transcript of the tapes, with some corrections by the interviewer, was sent to Mr. Wente on February 5, 1970. He made further corrections and a few deletions, added certain details, and checked over the entire text with the interviewer on February 24. Some further details, such as the first names of people mentioned, were added through correspondence during the final editing.

Mr. Wente spoke thoughtfully and with directness, often with humor, and always with the warmth and modesty mentioned in Dr. Maynard A. Amerine's introduction.

Ruth Teiser,
Interviewer

27 January 1971
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University of California at Berkeley

(Interview #1 - April 18, 1969)

EARLY YEARS OF THE WENTE VINEYARD

Teiser: You said that you were one of the first students at the University of California at Davis.

Wente: Yes, actually I was the second student ever enrolled at Davis.

Teiser: What year was that?

Wente: 1908. We didn't have any buildings at all except just the creamery and the old tank house. We roomed downtown. I stayed at the hotel and later got a room with Bill Grieve, one of the natives up there, and stayed there for a year and a half with him. Then they had the dormitory put up and the next semester I stayed in the dormitory.

There were only five of us students the first semester and we had nine profs. [Laughter] The next semester there were 35 students but we still had the nine profs. So we lived with the profs and had a lot of chance of absorbing a lot of their knowledge. We actually lived downtown at the hotel, and we traveled around quite a bit with the professors. Some of them commuted from Berkeley, but some of them stayed right there at Davis. Three or four of them stayed at the hotel with us.

Teiser: You did all your work in animal husbandry...

Wente: And agronomy. That's all they had was agronomy and animal husbandry. They had no viticulture or

Wente: horticulture department until later. But they did have good soils men there and exceptionally good animal husbandry people, and Dr. Haring*, veterinarian, who the veterinary building is named after, Haring Hall up there. He was the veterinarian I took work under.

Teiser: What sort of a man was he personally?

Wente: Dr. Haring?

Teiser: Yes. It's hard to find personal descriptions of people...

Wente: Dr. Haring was a very modest sort of a fellow, if you can visualize Dr. Cruess, he was on Dr. Cruess' type--a little taller, a little thinner--but very reticent. He didn't shove himself forward. Just very much on the order of Bill Cruess.

Teiser: Who else did you work with?

Wente: Well, later on of course with the viticulture department--and this is what you'd like to know about, I guess, more than animal husbandry.

Teiser: All of these things are of interest. I understand that you have continued an interest in animal husbandry, have you not? Haven't you been a cattle man part-time?

Wente: Yes. I still am. Still have a couple hundred head of cows. And they came in mighty handy when Prohibition came into effect.

Teiser: Let's go back. Let me start by asking you when you were born.

Wente: Well, I was born in 1890, July the 9th, 1890.

Teiser: Right here?

Wente: In this 50 acre plot here.

Teiser: So you at the time of Prohibition were...

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*Clarence M. Haring, D.V.M.

Wente: I was 28.

Teiser: Let's go even further back then, if you wouldn't mind. I'd like to know as much as you can recall, and as much as you know from family tradition, of the history of your family in the United States.

Wente: Well, my father* came from the northern part of Germany. He came from the province of Hanover. He was an animal husbandry man rather than viticulture, and, oh, he left Germany along in the latter '60's or '70's, 1870, somewhere along in that period. Had a couple of half-brothers who had settled in Illinois or Minnesota or somewhere along in there, but he couldn't locate them when he got over here, so he drifted out to Kansas and finally landed in California and went up to Lake County and worked for Dr. [Charles] Adams in Adams Springs for a number of years.

Teiser: What did he do there?

Wente: Oh, a laborer. Built fences and what have you. And then he came down from the hill and worked for... Speaking of the hill, he had to go over the St. Helena Mountain to get back to Napa. At that time I guess there was only one road in and out, and it was a toll road too. You had to pay toll to come in, in that portion of Lake County anyway.

Then he went to work for Charles Krug** and he worked down for Charles Krug for a few years and became Charles Krug's cellar boss or cellar man. That's where he learned enology, the making of wines.

Teiser: He must have learned fast!

Wente: Yes, well, those days you had to be pretty active and have a strong back and [be] willing to work, rather than have a lot of education and have everybody else do the work for you such as we're doing [laughter]. It just didn't work out that way in the early days.

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*Carl Heinrich Wente; born August 19, 1851, died April 10, 1934.

**Napa County wine grower.

Wente: Anyway, my mother had a sister that was married to a Belgian by the name of Gutzweiller--can you spell that? [spells it]--and she met my father in St. Helena.

Teiser: What was her maiden name?

Wente: Trautwein.* So that's the reason why I guess we were indoctrinated with wine [laughter]. Well she came from the southern part of Europe, near the Black Forest or in that neighborhood, a little village by the name of Lonsheim. And, her folks made wine and what have you. And so she was quite familiar with viticulture from that angle of it. And then, when they married, they came down here in 1883 and bought this tract of land which we're sitting on here--the 50 acres which we speak of as the "home place."

Teiser: There were two other people somehow involved in that, were there?

Wente: Yes. There was a Dr. George Bernard, who originated this 50 acres. And C. H. Wente, my father, and Dr. Louis Busch, and a man by the name of [Herman] Oterson, they each bought a third interest and took over from Dr. Bernard.

Teiser: It was already planted?

Wente: No, just part of it. Just about 20 acres was planted. There was no winery on the premises either. So there wasn't too much here. They didn't have any money so they had to start from scratch.

Teiser: What was the 20 acres planted to? Did you ever hear of it?

Wente: Oh, yes. I can remember it very well what it was planted to. Zinfandel, principally. Some Charbono and some Colombard and Mataro. Are you familiar with all these varieties?

Teiser: Most of them...

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*Barbara Trautwein. She was born on July 9, 1860, married Carl H. Wente in 1883, and died in Livermore on April 19, 1948.

Wente: And there was some Grey Riesling which he was very unhappy about, singularly. And he, after a few years undertook to graft them over to White Riesling, and during the interim the Schween family in Pleasanton were planting some grapes, and they came and got some cuttings off of these Grey Reisling and planted them down on the Vineyard Avenue road there in Pleasanton, and did very well with them. And after Repeal, when Herman and I started to plant vines again, I went down to get some cuttings from Mr. Will Schween and he said, "Well, well, well! The old Grey Riesling are going back home!" That's how we got back into the Grey Riesling business.

Teiser: This brings up the whole subject--which I won't interrupt you with now but perhaps we can go back to it--the changes in tastes in variety and types of wine which you must certainly have observed. So your father and his two partners then planted the whole 50 acres?

Wente: Yes, ma'am.

Teiser: And what did they put in besides...

Wente: Oh, they put in some Sémillon and some Burger and some Sauvignon blanc and some Colombard--commonly called today Sauvignon vert instead of the French Colombard as we know the Colombard today. There was some difference of opinion as to varieties in the early days, and we called Sauvignon vert, Colombard, and they had another name for the French Colombard. Some called it a White Riesling.

Teiser: I wanted to ask you where the cuttings came from.

Wente: Well, the Sauvignon here came from Mr. [Louis] Mel over here, who got them directly from Sauternes, France,from the--oh, my memory isn't as good as it used to be.

Teiser: Château d'Yquem?

Wente: Château d'Yquem, that's right. Later on, the owner of Château d'Yquem--oh, right after Repeal--visited us here, Marquis de [Lur] Saluces. I spent several days with him, taking him around, and he was very inquisitive. Wanted to know all about winds and so forth and the culture of grapes and whether we had

Wente: wind damage and why we planted straight varieties instead of blending them as they do in France in the vineyards. And we gave him some samples.

Herman brought in seven samples of continuous vintages of Sauvignon blanc, and he was very much surprised upon the evenness of these wines, how nearly alike they were year after year. And he passed the remark, he said, "You cannot do this in France. I did not say, however," he said, "that we do not have some vintages that are probably better than you are showing me, but you cannot do this in France, have them as even as you are showing me here." That was the Marquis de [Lur] Saluces, the owner of the Château d'Yquem, the vineyards. And he wrote in our guest book out there, "I am glad to find my children doing so well in California."

Teiser: [Laughter] Were many of the other vines that your father put in imported?

Wente: Yes, along about that time, oh, 1912 or '13, there was a Frenchman who was hired by the University by the name of Bonnet; you've probably heard of Bonnet.* He was one of the best authorities (I thought, anyway) of varieties in California at that time. Knew his varieties better than anyone, and I was taking some work at Davis then, and he was just a greenhorn Frenchman. He was a rather peculiar man. He had sort of a nasal twang which he was very sensitive about. He wasn't too happy about being an instructor, because the fellows more or less made fun over him and he was pretty sensitive about it.

However, I was his great friend since I had come from a vineyard family. And so he had a brother that was superintendant of Montpelier Nursery over in Montpelier, France, and I brought him home here to visit several times, and he talked my father into ordering some vines from Montpelier Nursery. So we got quite a shipment of vines from Montpelier. They were Ugni blanc, for one--what we call Ugni blanc. Mr. Clarence Wetmore had the same variety and he called them Saint-Émilion. They came from another

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*Leon O. Bonnet. He was a 1909 graduate of the National School of Agriculture, Montpelier, France.

Wente: part of France. So you can see the confusion when you are talking about varieties, which I referred to in discussing the Colombard and the Sauvignon vert.

And there were a number of other varieties that we got, just don't come to my mind right now, which we got through Mr. Bonnet.

Teiser: Did you get any varieties from Germany?

Wente: No ma'am, we did not. But they originated over in Alsace-Lorraine like these Grey Riesling. They're actually an Alsatian variety rather than a German variety. No one else had bottled under the name of Grey Reisling except Wente, and then when [after] we started it, it's been used quite a lot.

Teiser: Because it was good?

Wente: Well, we think it is. However, as a grape varietal, it's not outstandingly good. It's a very staple variety and something that you do not tire of. It's not nearly as fragrant as a Sauvignon blanc or some of these other finer French varieties--our Chardonnay, which we are bottling. But, you could drink it every day and not tire of it, you know, and after all, when you are in the business of making wine and selling it, you want something that the customer could use every day and not just for Sundays. [Laughter]

Teiser: Yes.

Wente: So that's our stronghold, our Grey Riesling, at the present time. Singularly, we were considered a sauterne district in the early days, along in the early days of Mr. Charles Wetmore who likened our Livermore Valley very much to the Bordeaux section of France where the sauternes grew, and Sémillons do exceptionally well here in this valley--the hours and units of the heat are just about right. We were considered a sauterne district rather than a Riesling district, and long after Repeal we were using the Riesling for display at the Fair at Sacramento and received many prizes for it--awards.

Dr. [A. J.] Winkler was in here one day and he said, "You fellows shouldn't be growing these Riesling varieties, you're a little too warm here, you're a sauterne district rather than a Riesling

The Wente Vineyard about 1898 (above) and in 1934 (below). Photographs courtesy of the Wine Institute and Wente Bros.

Wente Family, 1893. Photograph courtesy of Wente Bros.

The old Wente winery and family home, 1934. Photograph courtesy of Wente Bros.

Wente: district." And I passed the remark back to him. "Wink," I said, "we seem to do pretty well at the Fair, and they're selling well." And he says, "Yes, if you weren't such good winemakers you wouldn't do so well." And I said, "Well, gee, first you got to have the varieties." He says, "Yes, you've learned to live with these varieties and you learned how to handle them." He says, "The whole secret, I think, that you're doing is picking them at the right time and not letting them get too much heat."

And I think he's right in that respect. You do have to watch it very closely so they don't get too full-bodied ripe because then they will have too much flavor and the total acids would be low and they'll be rather bland rather than have the acidity that we like in a Riesling.

Teiser: I see. Before Prohibition, you made only white wines?

Wente: No, I wouldn't say that. We made a lot of red wines. Yes, in the early days [there] was a lot of common varieties of red planted in the Livermore Valley. However, it went off as bulk wines.

Teiser: Did you make some here?

Wente: Oh, yes.

CARL H. WENTE AND HIS CONTEMPORARIES

Wente: My father made a lot of Zinfandel, just vin ordinaire, and sold it by the hundreds of thousands of gallons. Yes, indeed. Then, of course, he specialized on whites, but that was by far the minority of his crush. His big crush was the vin ordinaire, of which he probably just swapped dollars. He told me one time that if he could just make two and one-half a ton, he was keeping his dollars together and keeping his men occupied so he could make some money off of the varietals. And it's probably true, too! When you've got a group of men around and you're just working on some little varietal,

Wente: you just can't operate. You just simply have to have more for them to do.

Teiser: When was the winery built? When did you start making wine?

Wente: Well, he started when he first came here along in 1883, '84. He just had a little, small operation.

Teiser: Yes. This wine business, the history of it, is rather unique. Most of these wineries were started or operated by people that did it for a hobby. This was not true with the Wente family. They didn't have any money and he had seven children to feed, and as he said, he had to make money out of it to feed the kids [laughter]. But you could think back--or I can--of the many, many operations that were operated by wealthy people in the early days, more so than there are today. However, there are many of them coming into it today that like to do this because they think it's a lot of fun.

Teiser: I can think of Captain Gustave Niebaum, but who else?

Wente: Well, Captain Niebaum was one of them, and in Livermore here, with which I am more familiar, there was Julius Paul Smith who created the Olivina. Planted olives and vines and had a trade name of Olivina. And it was a very famous wine at the time. Mr. Smith made his millions out of Death Valley borax--Twenty Mule Team borax--and when he got enough so he thought he could retire, he came to Livermore and bought 2300 acres and started to plant grapes. That was one of the most famous operations in the state.*

And then we had another operation--neighbor of his by the name of [Alexander] Duvall, an old Frenchman. He made his money out of building railroads in Peru over the Andes and came here and built up a chateau.** He had a regular chateau with a church and everything else on it, and wound up very sad. He had one daughter, and he tried to keep her very religious, and on the place that way, and she was very unhappy and she finally ran away and went

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*Some papers of the Olivina Winery are in the Bancroft Library manuscript collection

**He named it Chateau Bellevue.

Wente: to Chicago and he vowed he'd never see her again--which he never did. Even on his deathbed. He never saw his daughter again. He was a determined old Frenchman. I can remember him very well--stocky little old rascal!

Teiser: Was his wine good?

Wente: Very good, yes. And he had a good crew of men working for him too. Later worked for us, and around, and I knew them all pretty well.

Teiser: Were Smith's wines good?

Wente: Yes, fine. He made some champagnes that were exceptionally good. Haven't you ever seen the brochures on Olivina? By golly, I've got them around here somewhere. You know, there's a young fellow here by the name of Gibson* who was writing his thesis for his doctor's degree at Davis and he was interested in wines and he came down here half a dozen times and he sat and talked with me and gathered history. I've got his thesis here--a copy of it. He really put a lot of time in on it, and then he made some maps of the Livermore Valley here. I could sit here and talk to you all day and it wouldn't explain half of what this map would. And this map here shows you the amount of vineyards that was here in the early days. He showed the contour, he shows where Cresta Blanca is, and Ruby Hill.

Teiser: What's happened to Ruby Hill now--is it operating?

Wente: Yes, it's operating, but Ernest Ferrario, who's an old Italian, he's right around 90 years old. And he works every day very hard at it. He doesn't make very good wines, but he operates the place.

Now there was a lot of other quite well-to-do people around here. There was Dr. [Joseph] Altschul who created a vineyard** up there on the hill. He was a doctor out of Chicago that came to Livermore here

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*Gibson, David J., The Development of the Livermore Valley Wine District, University of California, Davis, M.A. thesis, 1969.

**The Vienna Vineyard.

Wente: and created a vineyard behind Cresta Blanca there.

Teiser: But your family was in it because it was the way your father liked, I guess, to make a living.

Wente: Well, it was something he started to work at, and of course if you have a family...

Teiser: I suppose it gave all of you boys something to do, didn't it?

Wente: I guess it did. According to his theory [laughter]--according to his theory, why, work made life sweet. Now it all depends on how you work. Brother Carl* didn't care to go out in a field with a hoe handle, so he got himself a job that was different. But I was still hoeing weeds, and still here hoeing weeds, and father's theory was that boys get into trouble if they were idle. And work was good for the soul and it was good to make citizens out of you, and I don't know that he had a point far as that's concerned. All we knew was work.

Teiser: All three of you boys turned out, you might say, rather well. Maybe he did have a point. [Laughter]

Wente: Oh, yes. He was kind of a hard master, a hard task-master. Very good to us, saw that we were well taken care of. I can still remember when I wanted to go to Davis, he says, "I don't know whether the college deal is good for you or not." He says, "All I had was a third grade education. I've raised my family and fed them. And Colonel Edwards* dean of math at the University of California, he came here in the '80's and he bought 200 acres and he started a farm and lost it--lost half of it by foreclosure to the bank, and I bought it from the bank. Now he was dean of math and had a college education, and I only had a third grade education. I don't know whether college education is good for you or not."

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*Carl F. Wente.

**George C. Edwards. He was for many years commandant of the cadets at the University in Berkeley as well as professor of mathematics.

Wente: Its got some sense to that too, you know. I maintain that an education is very valuable to you if you'll utilize it the right way. But if you just want to sit down and play, you'd probably be better off without it. I think learning how to work is more important than an education, number one. Number two comes the education, but if you haven't the ambition to work all the education in the world can just make you that much worse, I think.

Teiser: Your father gradually then added to his acreage?

Wente: Yes, yes. He added quite a little, and Prohibition came along and that took the heart out of him, and he said, "I'm all through." He said, "Now you boys want to operate, you may."

Teiser: How many acres did you have at the time of Prohibition?

Wente: You mean of grapes?

Teiser: Yes.

Wente: You see, we were kind of dual operators. He was too. He still was of the same frame of mind that I was, that never put all your eggs in one basket. He said, "You might drop your basket." And Prohibition taught us that too--there's no question about that. [Laughter] So, we dropped our basket as far as grapes are concerned but we kept on operating in livestock, cattle and hogs, and owned sheep and what have you, and raised barley, which we went right on ahead and did.

Teiser: But how many acres did you have in grapes?

Wente: About 200 acres in grapes about that time. Herman and I gradually, and my son Karl, we gradually increased this to about 800 acres here--a little more--in grapes.

Teiser: Let me ask one thing more about your father's days. I believe it was the younger Louis Martini* who mentioned that his grandfather and grandmother were friends of your parents? Is that right?

Wente: Yes. I can remember Louis' grandfather** very well. He had a little place down here at Pleasanton on

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*Louis P. Martini.

**Agostino Martini.

Wente: the hill. This was along about 1912 to the time Prohibition went into effect. Then he started to sell off his equipment and was going back to Italy.

Teiser: He was making wine?

Wente: Yes, he was making wine. However, I don't think this was his entire business. He was a merchant in San Francisco at the commission markets, who did something of that order in San Francisco, and he came here on weekends and had this place, and later spent all of his time here. He was a very jovial little Italian...uh, quite different than his son. I'm not speaking of junior, I'm speaking of Louis Senior, Louis [M.] Martini, who's high-powered, high strung. Well, my father bought his crusher when the old gentleman left for Europe, and Louis just came back from Italy. Then he went over to Italy to the university, and I don't think his father was happy. He had big ideas, I think, and his father thought, "Well, gee, he'd better save what he had and go back to the old country!" [Laughter] This is my idea. And so Louis was on his own, and did tremendously well.

I can remember during World War II we had a meeting in San Francisco, and Louis and I were having lunch together, and Louis says, "I'm worried. I'm worried that I don't hear from my folks any more." He said, "All communications have been shut off and I've been trying to send them money and I don't know whether they received it or not." And he said, "I wish I knew some way to contact them." Well, Paul Tarpey was there. You remember Paul Tarpey? Paul Tarpey was a wine broker and operator on vines down the Valley. Paul says, "Louis, have you tried the Church?" "Yes," he says, "I have. But," he says, "I don't get anywhere." Paul says, "While you're eating lunch, let me go out and try." So he went out and in about an hour he came back, and he said, "Louis, it's all fixed." He said, "Within two days you'll get all the word from your folks." And I said to Paul, "How'd you do this?" Well, he said, "I knew, if you're going to reach him through the Church you had to be a good Catholic. I'm Catholic but I'm not a working Catholic, and I knew that I had to get somebody that was a working Catholic. I

Wente: worked at the Examiner for many years and," he said, "I knew one of the chief man at the Examiner who's a good working Catholic who had all the contacts right to the hierarchy in Rome." And he said, "I went to him with the story and he just put his wheels into motion." He said, "This is how it worked. So," he said, "I will find out for Louis all about his folks." And the word came back in a few days that his folks were all right and that he could send his money through the Church and reach his folks.

Paul was quite a publicity man and he really was quite a boy. He was the first captain of the Stanford team that played in the Rose Bowl.

Teiser: Oh he was!

Wente: [Laughter] He says, "While we lost, I was still the first captain." [Laughter]

Teiser: You mentioned Charles A. Wetmore. Do you remember him?

Wente: Yeah, oh very well. Charles Wetmore was one of the first graduates of the University of California. And he was a newspaper writer, and very much interested in wine. And he got the appointment politically to go to Europe to find out about varieties and study viticulture. Came back and started Cresta Blanca. But he wasn't a very good businessman, and his brother Clarence [J. Wetmore] was a better businessman and took over and he'd got some capital from [Charles E.] Bowen, so they called it Wetmore-Bowen. That was the origination of Cresta Blanca.

Teiser: What were the two men like personally--the Wetmore brothers.

Wente: Well, Charles was a very near-sighted man. You'd think he'd be looking out the room and he'd be looking right straight at you. Very jovial and smart as all get out. He knew chemistry and he just... But he loved champagne too well, I think this was one of his great faults. But Clarence did a tremendous job on promoting Cresta Blanca.

Teiser: What sort of a person was Clarence?

Wente: Clarence was also a first graduate of the University of California. But he married some money too, which helps. [Laughter] And a very nice fellow, very fine man. He wasn't as big in stature as Charles, but he was calmer and thought things out, I think, in a more business-like manner than Charles who was very jovial and liked to play a little bit.

Charles came over here and was a great tutor to my father on making sauternes. He used to come over here and spend weeks with my father teaching him how to make the sweet sauternes, and the chemistry of wines, and so forth. That was after he was out of Cresta Blanca, and he didn't have much of a source of income.

Teiser: What happened to Cresta Blanca after? What was the subsequent history of it?

Wente: Well, when Prohibition went into effect, Mr. Wetmore was well to do--that is Clarence Wetmore--and he had a salesman by the name of Johnson, who sold champagne. L[ucien] B. Johnson. And he ran it more or less during Prohibition, just to keep it alive, and then after Repeal he sold it to Schenley--Schenley Industries.

Teiser: What other of the early winemakers did your family know and you know?

Wente: Well, I guess they knew them all.

WINE MEN OF 1915 AND 1939

Wente: Did you ever see the picture of the wine group at the 1915 Fair? Now, this is the 1915 group of vintners, and there's the Palace of Fine Arts.

Teiser: This was taken July 12, 1915 at the Fair. The Panama Pacific International Exposition at San Francisco. The International Congress of Viticulture.*

Wente: Yes. Well, this is Mr. Clarence Wetmore.

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*Photograph by Cardinell-Vincent Company.

Teiser: Oh, down in the first row with a boutonniére.

Wente: And this is Mr., Mr.--champagne maker down in Los Gatos--Paul Masson. This is Mr. [Secondo] Guasti from 'way down South.

Teiser: With a black moustache?

Wente: Black moustache. Uh, this--I'll have to jump around a little bit because this was a delegate from one of the foreign countries, and some of these others were too. So I do not know them all, but going along here, this was Mr. [Louis] Mel.

Teiser: With the white beard.

Wente: With the white beard. And he was our neighbor.

Teiser: He was a wine grower too.

Wente: Yes. His wife was a cousin or second cousin to the Château d'Yquem people.

And, well this man's up from Napa way. These are all Napa boys. And this is Horatio Stoll; he was secretary of the Grape Association,* they called it then, and later it became the Wine Institute.

Teiser: He's on the right hand end.

Wente: Yes. He's a Sacramento boy.

And as we come down the line here, this one was over from Napa way, and I'll try and take both lines as I come: that's brother Herman.

Teiser: Standing up there with a black sweater on, in the back row.

Wente: Yes. We go down the line here. I think this is one of the Rossis, [in] the black suit. One of the Rossis has a bow tie back there in the background.

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*California Grape Growers Association. See page 67.

Wente: That's the Rossis.* And this is Professor [George] Husmann. He was head of the viticulture branch of the U.S. Department of Agriculture at that time.

Teiser: Black moustache and about the center--middle row.

Wente: And this is Ed [Edgar M.] Sheehan of the Sacramento Valley vineyard, Cordova Vineyards [at Perkins]. He was one of the first presidents of the Wine Grape Growers Association.

Teiser: He's in the middle row with a kind of President Hoover collar on.

Wente: Yes. This is Carl Bundschu--no, Gundlach--this is Mr. [Jacob] Gundlach and this is Mr. Bundschu over here. The two of them look rather alike and they were partners. Gundlach-Bundschu. And this fellow was over out of Solano County.

Teiser: The fellow with the big beard?

Wente: Yes. Very gruff sort of a fellow. And that's me, back there.

Teiser: The very top row, second from the right.

Wente: From the right. And this is Professor [Frederic T.] Bioletti. Little old Dr. Bioletti.

Teiser: He's at the top row to the left, with his hat in his hand. What was he like? Was he an excitable little fellow?

Wente: He was a bluff little guy, really. [Laughter] Yeah, I'd say he's an excitable little fellow. He was quite a showman--like he's just showing off there. Most very small men are that way, aren't they?

This fellow here is a brother to this Husmann, over here where I showed you Mr. Husmann of the Viticulture Department. This is his brother. This is Fred. Now we're coming along here and I don't

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*Edmund A. and Robert D. Rossi, the twin sons of Pietro C. Rossi, of Italian Swiss Colony.

Wente: know this one, but this is Mr. [Emil C.] Priber.

Teiser: Fourth from the left end, standing--white beard.

Wente: He was the president of the Napa & Sonoma Wine Company. And, this is Mr. [Edwin A.] Grau.

Teiser: Next one to the left. Little white beard.

Wente: Grau and [Edwin P.] Werner were great friends of my father. They created Los Amigos Vineyard over here at Irvington.

Teiser: Oh, yes!

Wente: Now, this man was working with my father with Charles Krug.

Teiser: Mr. Werner?

Wente: No. Mr. Grau. And Mr. Werner is not here. He wasn't able to come. Mr. Werner was superintendant of the Greystone Winery in St. Helena. And Mr. Werner lived in that little cottage right alongside of the Greystone. Still there the last time I was up there, the little cottage, and that's where Mr. Werner lived, and my father used to go over and visit with him all the time. That's how he got acquainted, around St. Helena. They were great friends, Grau and Werner. And this is my father here.

Teiser: Oh, he's standing on the left end.

Wente: Yes.

Teiser: He looks like your brother Carl a good deal, doesn't he?

Wente: Very much. And this is Mr. [Frank A.] Busse. He was working for the Napa & Sonoma Wine Company as a superintendant and salesman.

Teiser: Second line.

Wente: And so when this man Priber wanted to sell Napa & Sonoma Wine Company, he came to my father, who had the money to put up, and Busse didn't have the money, and so the two of them entered into an agreement to

Wente: buy the Napa & Sonoma Wine Company. My father became president of the Napa & Sonoma Wine Company; then Mr. Busse ran the works. Then when Prohibition came, why he, my father, said to Busse, "You've worked hard and we've made a lot of money out of this thing. I'm going to give you this inventory and all the wine and everything for the cost of the inventory, and you take the labels and everything and capitalize on it as best you can." So that was the end of Napa & Sonoma as far as my father was concerned.* He just washed everything right out.

And he turned around to us boys and he said, "Now I'm going to put a price on your ranches here, and you get first chance to buy them if you want to buy them, and I'll take your notes on them but put them down cheap, and if you don't want to buy them I'm going to sell to somebody else." He said, "I've found out in my lifetime that I can divide a dollar evenly so the family has no quarrels, but I can't divide a piece of property evenly. There will always be a family feud. So," he said, "this piece of land is worth so much. This peice of land is worth so much. Now you were here with me all these years and you have number one choice." So I picked where I'm living, on that piece of land. Herman picked this one across the street. So then we created Wente Brothers.** [Laughter]

Teiser: Oh, that's the story. I couldn't figure out why, when your father lived so many years longer, you came along and created Wente Brothers. What year was that?

Wente: Well, we created Wente Brothers ficticiously--we never incorporated or anything--in 1918, right when Prohibition went into effect. So Herman went into the [World War I] service, and I stayed here and ran the ranches until he got back. Now, we're getting away from my story. Now, then, this [showing group portrait] was the 1939 fair.***

Teiser: [reading] "Sixth Annual Conference, Wine Industry

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*See also pages 64-65.

**See also pages 53-55.

***Golden Gate International Exposition.

Teiser: and Related Interests, Treasure Island, June 5th, 1939."

Wente: As far as I know there's only one man alive that's in both these pictures and that's me. Unless it's Ed Rossi. This is Harry Caddow. He was with the Wine Institute. And this is L[ucien] B. Johnson who bought Cresta Blanca, and Mr. [Clarence] Wetmore, this is he, here, in the front row. But I'm back in here somewhere, if you can find me. But Herman was in it too, here.

Teiser: He's on the left--standing next to someone with a clerical collar.

Wente: That was Brother--one of the Jesuits. Here's Georges de Latour.

Teiser: Oh yes, front row. (That reminds me to ask you about your association with the Beaulieu Vineyard during Prohibition.)

Wente: That's where I am.

Teiser: Oh there you are. I see.

Wente: Dr. [A. J.] Winkler. The other two doctors from Davis. I can't think of their names--the one with very thick glasses and--oh golly, I know them like I know...

Teiser: Not Dr. Amerine?

Wente: Amerine should be there somewhere.

Teiser: That's a good looking group of men, isn't it?

Wente: For a bunch of winos, they look pretty good, don't they? [Laughter]

I'm quite proud of the fact that I'm the only one that's in both of these pictures, unless it would be Ed Rossi. Here's Ed Rossi, here.

Teiser: Oh! Almost in the center, in the light suit, to the right of a woman. Yes. I spoke to his son the other day to ask how he was, because we want to interview him too. He said that he was getting along

Teiser: all right and he thought in a few weeks he'd be well enough to be interviewed.

Wente: Oh? He's no older than I am.

Teiser: Well, he was hit by an automobile. In some freak accident.*

Wente: You asked about de Latour and Beaulieu. We sold wines to Mr. de Latour for years. My father used to sell him wine.

Teiser: In bulk?

Wente: In bulk, yes. Sauternes. We never bottled here before Prohibition. We bottled in Napa & Sonoma, but we never bottled Wente wines here.

Teiser: There was no Wente label used?

Wente: There was no Wente label used. My father at the 1915 Fair, he said, "I'm probably the proudest man here at this fair because I've won four gold medals all on the white wines. I've won four gold medals and none of them were in my name." [Laughter] Wine that he sold to Napa & Sonoma, to Beaulieu, to Gundlach-Bundschu, and one or two others. They all presented them at the fair and they all won gold medals. But Pops didn't have a thing to say about it. [Laughter]

Teiser: I think I read somewhere that during Prohibition most of your wine went to...

Wente: We had one customer during Prohibition--1918 or '20 to Repeal--and that was Beaulieu Vineyard. We made them their sweet sauternes for altar purposes. Before, my father used to sell it to them in bulk, in barrels, and I can remember it so well. Mr. de Latour was also a poor man, didn't have any money. He started from scratch. And he'd come down here and he'd take samples and my father said, "Well, Georges, there isn't much use to be showing samples to you. I can't sell you any more wine. You owe me

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*The interview with Edmund A. Rossi was subsequently held.

Wente: for two years now. And I have to pay my men. I can't sell you any more wine."

"I will tell you something, Mr. Wente," he said. "My business is with the Church. They are slow paying but they are good." So Pops would weaken and give Georges de Latour some wine. [Laughter]

So when Prohibition came, and of course he was the only one in the state probably who was selling any altar wines at the time to speak of, so he had the big trade then, and we made him 30,000 gallons of sweet Sémillon or sweet sauterne each year, Herman and I did. Herman principally, because I was busy farming. And we had no trouble at all as far as selling and collecting. By that time, he just ran on top and they did a nice job.

The Beaulieu Vineyards were kind of a sad situation. The boy never was very strong or healthy, which Mr. de Latour was very, very upset over and very sad about. The girl took it over and she married. Now it's in the hands of the Sullivans, I think pretty much. And they're going on all right. They're very fine people, but they could have done as well as the Wentes if they had some sons to carry it on. Not that they didn't do as well as the Wentes, but they had the upper hand on the whole thing after Repeal because they were <u>the</u> label. They were right in the driver's seat when Repeal came.

Teiser: And were they not fairly well financed by then?

Wente: Oh yes, no problems at all.

Well, it came to the point where, along about 1926-'27, the Alcohol Tax Unit wouldn't give you a permit to transfer wines from one bonded winery to the other, if you did not use it for blending. So Mr. de Latour was beside himself. He couldn't buy our wines, without he took them up to <u>their</u> vineyards and blended them. And this you can't do with the sweet sauternes because they were sweetened a little bit and they would ferment immediately, and he was beside himself. And he said, "Well, you're not doing anything with your bond. Why don't you transfer it over to Beaulieu Vineyards? And then we can carry on and we will give it back to you after Repeal, if and when it comes."

Teiser: You were bonded all this time?

Wente: We were bounded all this time. We were making bonded wine. We had to in order to make wine for Beaulieu Vineyards. And so--we didn't have any other customers--what would you do? [Laughter] So we became Beaulieu Vineyards Bonded Winery Number 898 or whatever our number is, for seven or eight years. So then we could ship, or Beaulieu Vineyards could ship wines from this bonded winery directly to its agency all over the United States, Chicago and different parts; we'd just load the barrels in cars at his direction and send them on. So we were Beaulieu Vineyards for a number of years just in the eyes of the tax people.* They paid us by the gallon.

Teiser: And you just made that one wine?

Wente: We just made that one wine.

Teiser: It was not a fortified wine?

Wente: No, ma'am.

Teiser: I thought most sacramental wines were.

Wente: Yes, but the sweet sauternes were not. They were sweetened; we arrested the fermentation at about two degrees Balling and under 14 per cent alcohol.

PRE-PROHIBITION DAYS

Teiser: Let me go back to your education and your brothers'. Did you all have duties in the winery?

Wente: Oh, it was kind of a family run institution, yes.

Teiser: This 1893 picture, I think it has been reproduced a good many times. It is delightful--with the whole family and the barrels and the Oriental rug!

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*See also pages 65-66.

Wente: [Laughter] That was mother's idea--the Oriental rug.

Teiser: You didn't keep the Oriental rug there every day?

Wente: Oh, heavens, no!

Teiser: Would you identify these people in this...

Wente: Ah, yes, I can identify them all.

Teiser: Would you start on the left side?

Wente: That's me.

Teiser: You're on the left.

Wente: That's Carl over here.

Teiser: ...on the right. And then who's second from left?

Wente: That's sister Carolyn.

Teiser: And third from left...

Wente: That's mother and Herman.

Teiser: The baby is Herman?

Wente: Herman. And father and sister May and Carl. There was only five of us at that time. Then sister Frieda and Hilma came later.

Teiser: If it was in front of the winery, how did the barrels happen to be out there in such a nice arrangement?

Wente: Well, they were kept there for shipping. We shipped in these puncheons then, always.

Teiser: The ones to the right and the left. How many gallons would they hold?

Wente: A hundred and eighty gallons, in that neighborhood, 160 to 180. They were puncheons.

Teiser: And what about the upright barrel?

Wente: This barrel? That was the breakdown or 50 gallon barrel. And this was a 50 gallon barrel here. This

Wente: was the bulk shipment when my father sold the vintage each year to, oh, Gundlach-Bundschu, or to Italian Swiss Colony or what have you who bought it. Lachman & Jacobi was the principal buyer at that time.

Teiser: The principal buyer of your wine?

Wente: They were the principal buyers, yes. Of the bulk wine, not the finer wines. The finer wines went to the small groups of bottlers such as Napa & Sonoma and Gundlach-Bundschu and people like that who bottled individually.

Teiser: Did Gundlach-Bundschu or Lachman & Jacobi make any of their own wines, or did they just bottle?

Wente: Lachman & Jacobi, no; they were just merchants.

Teiser: Gundlach too?

Wente: They had a vineyard up at Sonoma. They did make a few wines, but principally bought their wines.

Teiser: You may have seen in Herb Caen's column in the San Francisco Chronicle that somebody unearthed some information about A. Finke's Widow, and there's been some interest in the firm.

Wente: My father sold A. Finke's Widow right along. We have some books that my father kept since he started, showing who he sold to and prices he got.

Teiser: Who was A. Finke's widow? Are you aware of her identity or...

Wente: No, that's just a name principally, as far as I was concerned. I helped barrel it up a lot of times and made the shipment to A. Finke's Widow, but my father did the traveling. In those days you had to go by train in the morning to San Francisco. There was a local train that left here about six-thirty, and came home about five o'clock at night. That was the only transportation we had. We didn't have any automobiles. Then he bought his first automobile in 1906. I've been driving an automobile since 1906. That's quite a long time, too. I still have a driver's license and have never gone to the hospital yet on account of an automobile accident. I've had

Wente: a few little bumps but never hurt. This is a long time and I guess it must total millions [of miles]; I don't know, I haven't any idea.

Teiser: Your father then had to go to the city frequently?

Wente: Yes.

My father, as you see [in the 1893 photograph] had a cane. He hurt his hip. He tipped over a load of hay right up on the hill here when I was six months old, so my mother tells me, and broke his hip. And up until that point why he just worked, worked, worked. Had a good head but he never used it so much. He just felt that he had to earn a living by hard work. And then when he got crippled up, why then, he used to tell me, "I had six kids to feed and I had to make a living for them. So," he said, "I started contracting and pruning and planting vines and hired a lot of men and rode around in a horse and buggy." Couldn't walk, so he rode around in a horse and buggy and superintended it. His wine making the same way. In those days you could hire good men. You couldn't do that today [laughter]. I can tell you that!

[Albert Kirkman brings in books.] You did meet Kirk, didn't you?

Teiser: No, I didn't.

Wente: Mr. Kirkman's been with us since Repeal, along with the hostess, Adele [Kruger], along with Bruno [Canziani] the winemaker. They all came to work with Herman and me right after Repeal and they're still here.*

Come over here and sit down. [Looking at father's account books.] Some of these old figures aren't so good. This is 1894. This is a chart of our middle block of grapes, and this is what he received in pounds from it. But this book goes on and on and on. I'll just give you a quick look. Napa-Sonoma Wine and Brandy Company. Later they

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*See page 52.

Wente: called it Napa & Sonoma Wine Company. "In 1895 settled to satisfaction," father says here. [Laughter]

Teiser: Must have had a hard time getting that! [Laughter]

Wente: Well, it does say the discount, and so forth. Didn't amount to much as far as dollars is concerned, but that's just one item. I'll just turn over that quickly so... There's quite a history right in this little old book here. "Sweet must"--This [looking at another book] was his blend book rather than his sales book. This is where he made his blends.

Teiser: Oh, made records of his blends. I see.

Wente: And Herman and I used it many, many times, too.

Teiser: Followed his blends?

Wente: Yes. Napa & Sonoma Wine Company--that is what he used in blending. He blended up six, seven thousand gallons for Napa & Sonoma Wine Company, haut sauterne, see. And this is what he used in it. It showed five tenths above Balling, used six cans of tannin for white...

Teiser: And the grapes?

Wente: He used sauterne--that's Sémillon--and the Colombard and the Golden Chasselas and the Folle blanche and the sweet Colombard he blended in, and Neuchâtel. And there were 43 parts here--you see, he used 15 parts of...

Teiser: They used to make a Golden Chasselas wine, didn't they?

Wente: Yes.

Teiser: Was it any good?

Wente: No. The Neuchâtel was a Swiss type of wine.

This [book] is getting pretty well worn out, isn't it? Now we'll go to one of the other books and see what he sold. He wrote pretty well, don't you think?

Wine sold 1889 wholesale

April	Arpad Darasthy & Co. S. F.		
	2896 Gall F. B.		
	479 " Eddh		
	163 " Riesl.		
	3538 Gall at 20 cts		$ 707 60
	Freight on 22 Punch Wine	41 63	
	Gauging 22 "	4 40	
	Hauling 22 mt " 12½ cts	2 75	48 78
Paid Aug. 30	net		$ 658 82
	Flegenheimer Bros New York		
June 7	2478½ Gall. Burgundy		
	1479½ " Zinf & Malaro		
	985 " Zinf sec. crop		
	4943 Gall at 13 ¢		$ 642 59
Less	freight on 100 Ell. Wine	57 68	
	Gauging	10 00	67 68
	net		$ 574 91
	Paid July 3d		

Gundlach & Co.
1000 Gall Charbono Bal. Z & M.
April 17 shipped in all 10134 Gall
to May 22d at 11 ¢ per Gall. net result $ 980 10

Paid Sep 26th

Page from Carl H. Wente's Account Book

Teiser: I should say so! Your brother Carl had a good bookkeeper to come up to, didn't he? Wasn't he for a time the bookkeeper?

Wente: For a while, yes.

This is Gundlach & Company here--thousand gallons of Charbono.

Teiser: [Reading] Arpad Haraszthy and Company in 1889.

Wente: [W. P.] Bartlett and [George B.] Crane. I'm looking here for Timothy Hayes--that's a neighbor over here. H. B. Wagoner. H. B. Wagoner ran a winery downtown here. Fisher Packing Company. [Turning pages] Haraszthy, 1892. Haraszthy was supposed to receive most credit for bringing over these grapes from Europe, you know.

Teiser: Yes, the father of Arpad was it not?

Wente: That's what they say. I wasn't there... [Laughter] There's Lachman; Franz and Fuchs, 14th Street, Oakland. James Concannon. He sold wine to Concannon, then too. Overland Transfer & Freight, Haraszthy again. [More page turning] A. Finke's Widow's around here, somewhere, 1886.

Teiser: Your father really had a beautiful hand.

Wente: A very methodical man. You know, he came up the hard way, really. I mean he got cripped up, and then as time went on he became very prominent in local affairs, and they started a bank downtown here and he became president of that, too. You knew that, I guess?

Teiser: Yes, I think I did and I'm glad to have it on the tape.

Wente: And Carl and I, as I tried to tell you, were here hoeing weeds one day, and Carl was sitting over by the fence, and I said, "Gee, we're never going to get any weeds hoed if you sit over there. Pops is going to be mad with us." And he said, "Well, I've got to get a job that pays more money than this!" [Laughter] He got himself a job in the bank. That was more to his liking.

Teiser: Well, I guess it was a good enough choice. [Laughter]

Wente: He did all right for himself. [Laughter] Yes, indeed, he did all right.

[Turning pages of book] Here's Lachman & Jacobi now. Bertin & Lepori. They were a very famous company or outfit. Napa & Sonoma Wine Company, 1906. Italian Swiss Colony. Union Wine Company. The Winedale Company.

My son [Karl] is somewhat on the order of my father, you know; he's always busy, busy, busy. He never quits. Ciocca-Lombardi. Here's Oterson. This was my father's partner, you know, that I talked to you about. Chauche & Bon. Alta Vista Wine Company. There were a lot of old firms in San Francisco. Chevalier & Company. Chaix & Bernard, 1900. William Hoelscher. Did you know the Hoelschers? They ran I. De Turk.* They were very good friends.

Teiser: I'm coming near the end of my tape. Could I come back and continue?

Wente: Well, do you think I have that much information?

Teiser: Yes, yes. I want to go back and begin, really, with your going to college and your brother Herman's education, and carry forward in some little more detail on that.

Wente: Well, brother Herman went to U.C. My wife was a U.C. graduate. Karl's a Stanford [graduate] so we went to the Stanford football games when he was at Stanford; we didn't know which side to root for. [Laughter] Whether we should be true to Cal or root for Stanford! Now his son, by the way--we received notice yesterday that he is accepted at Stanford--Karl's oldest boy. So he's going to Stanford next year.

I wanted Karl to go to Davis. Right when he was a little fellow he used to go around with me in the ranch all the time. His mother tried to tell him

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*As successors to Isaac De Turk.

Wente: he'd better prepare himself in high school for education in college: "But you've got to make up your mind what you want to do." And he says, "I know what I want to do." He says, "I'm going to be a farmer like my father. I've got my mind made up to that already." So that's the way he went.

Well, I tried to get him to go to Davis, then. No, he wanted to go to Stanford anyway. He went to Stanford, and when he got through I said, "Well, you ought to go up to Davis to take at least six months, and why don't you go up and see Dr. Winkler?" And Joe Concannon* was a graduate of Notre Dame, and the two of them were the same age. They went to high school here together and so they decided, on my pressure, that they'd go up and see Dr. Winkler and see if they couldn't take six months of post-grad work in viticulture. They got up to Davis, and Winkler was giving them a bad time. He really gave them a terrible time, I guess, because he said, "Hell, you fellows both come here from the best quality wineries in the state, and you went to Stanford and you went to Notre Dame, and now you come here and you expect me to educate you in six months." [Laughter] And he had a point too! He was pretty bitter and outspoken about it.

So, when Karl came home, I said, "Well, I suppose you're all set to go to Davis." He says, "I wouldn't go there for all the money in the world." He says, "The way he treated me!" [Laughter] So that settled going to Davis--that was his post-graduate--he took it all in one day! [Laughter]

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*Joseph Concannon, Jr.

(Interview #2 - April 21, 1969)

VINEYARD PROBLEMS AND SOLUTIONS

Wente: I'd like to go back over the history of grape industry here in California a little bit, as I remember from the time my father got into it here in Livermore--the date I was born. Of course I can't remember the first immature years of my life, but I can remember from 1896 on quite vividly.

We lived--I mean we as children--ran around here and worked with it and helped him with everything he did. It was a family organization. And of course, as the vines were planted here in California, they all were planted on their own roots--the vinifers, the European varieties, and the phylloxera came. Of course, you can get the history of the phylloxera in all the record books--what it did to California. But they grew very prolific here, all on virgin soil to begin with, and everybody and his brother planted vines and it wasn't too long, by the year 1900 we had a gutted market on grapes, and just awfully depressed, up to the point where they were selling for six dollars per ton. And wine--bulkwise--I can remember my father taking these grapes in at six dollars per ton, and didn't want them because he didn't feel that he could make any money, but the growers all had these grapes and so he offered to take them in as best he could with what cooperage he had, and was selling wine for six and one-half cents again. So you see, there wasn't very much spread, and it went this way for quite a while. But phylloxera---Mother Nature takes care of things pretty well--phylloxera came along and thinned out all these vineyards, and they had to start from scratch again like they did in France, by using the American rootstock which was resistant to the little root louse.

And then the vintners needed help and so the Department of Agriculture, the United States Department of Agriculture, devised the branch called

Wente: the Viticulture Department, which put in these experimental plots. The main one was at Oakville near Rutherford. It's still in operation by the University of California now, by Davis. There was another plot--there were four in the state--right here where we are sitting, the site of this office. Had over a hundred varieties of rootstock, and they did not do any grafting here but they did plant over a hundred American rootstocks here to see which would be the most phylloxera-resistant, and the most vigorous.

Teiser: What period was this?

Wente: This was from 1904 'til Prohibition came in in 1918, when it went out of existence and the Department of Viticulture went out at the same time.

Teiser: Where were the other plantings?

Wente: One was down at Fresno and the other was over at Lodi. Those two went out of existence earlier, but this one remained in until Prohibition came in, when the department went out. We looked at that [1915 fair] picture and I showed you Mr. Hussman who was head of that department at that time. One of his workers--and I worked with him in this plot, here as a boy, when I was 16 along about--was George Hecke. He later became head of the Department of Agriculture here in California, if you remember back--and I guess you can remember back--when they had the foot and mouth infection here in California in 1924. Mr. Hecke was the head of the Department of Agriculture for the State of California at that time, when they killed all the cows and we were in this infected area here. Since it started in Contra Costa County we were quarantined, and all the cattle that showed any sign of infection of hoof and mouth were destroyed. The state payed for them, and Mr. Hecke at that time was head of the department.

We talked the other day about me being at Davis, and he at that time had a piece of land at Woodland, and I used to ride my bicycle--I had a bicycle at Davis--I used to ride my bicycle from Davis Farm up to see Mr. Hecke. Used to visit back and forth with him. It was kind of my second home when I was at Davis. I used to go over to see Mr. Hecke. He has

Wente: since passed away. But he became very prominent during the hoof and mouth disease. He had much opposition to what he was doing but he eradicated the hoof and mouth and saved the state of California a great deal of misery by going out and killing all four-footed animals--cloven hoofed animals--subject to hoof and mouth. Hogs and deer and everything else that was in the infected area. Even went over to the Sierras and killed all the wild deer. And he became very unpopular, but he did a tremendous job.

Teiser: And we've never had it seriously here since?

Wente: We've never had a serious outbreak here since, and they've watched it very closely. It's something that our trained technicians and veterinarians have never seen. It was just by chance the county veterninarian in Alameda County recognized it down at Richmond, and it started from there. It was brought in from off the boats with foreign swill that was fed to the hogs over there, and started this infection, and it got pretty widespread before they knew what it was all about. Well, so much for that. Then it went on. After Repeal, we then became infected with viruses.

Teiser: The vineyards.

Wente: The vineyards, of course. And we didn't know how to control it, and the University at that time was our only place to go and they, we felt, were not doing too good of a job for us, and they were doing a tremendous job as far as enology was concerned--as far as wineries were concerned--but outside is where we were dying. And we, Wine Institute, put enough pressure on them 'til we now are getting somewhere to learn how to cope with the viruses.

The viruses are now hosted by the nematode, which is the carrying factor of the viruses and the spreading factor, and the University now is doing us a good job. But we were all for, at a time, trying to feel that perhaps we'd have to go to the United States Department of Agriculture and ask for them to help us again such as they did during the phylloxera period.

Teiser: When did the viruses start affecting the industry generally and this vineyard?

Wente: Oh, along when we first became aware that there was something wrong other than phylloxera--about 15 years ago. It's only been in the last 15 or 20 years that it's grown gradually worse, up to the point where now we are very conscious of it and how to operate.

We sterilize all ground--we call it sterilization. We inject a detergent which kills the nematodes, as near as we can, before we plant. We destroy the nematodes which is the carrying factor of the virus and then we seem to get off to a better start with our new plantings. This only happens on the old second planting and third plantings. We don't have that much trouble with virgin ground, on new plantings on virgin ground.

Teiser: Incidentally, have you done any plantings not on native rootstock, as I think Almaden has and some others?

Wente: Yes, we have, and lost them again by phylloxera, as well as the virus. And now we're re-planting again.

Teiser: Really! What area was this?

Wente: Right in here, right across the street from here, and also down this other way. After Repeal, in order to get back in production again quickly, we went to their own roots rather than to spend the time going resistant.

Teiser: Which means grafting?

Wente: Which means grafting and budding or what have you, changing over the tops into the vinifers from the resistant or the American rootstock. If you remember the history of the phylloxera that destroyed all of the vines even in Europe as well as here.

Teiser: What stock was finally used? Not Mission?

Wente: It's a native wild rootstock principally, from Georgia and South Carolina and some of the southern states, that we are using the resistant vines from,

Wente: rather than Mission grape. That is a European grape that is subject to the phylloxera. The reason for the wild stock--this phylloxera apparently is a little microscopic root louse which lives underground and works on the cambium layer of the plant and sucks the life flow of the sap out of the plant and they eventually die. But the American rootstock has lived with this phylloxera for thousands of years and built up an immunization by tightening up its bark to the point where the little louse can't get in. And this is why we are using the American rootstock.

Teiser: And your efforts to use the others have failed?

Wente: Yes, and I'm afraid that those that are now using vinifers on their own roots in new districts such as we are going into down at Greenfield, and are letting ourselves wide open to the infestation of phylloxera sooner or later. I just kind of believe that it will hold. I've lived with the phylloxera so much and I've discussed it with Dr. Winkler at times, and he feels that from the economy of the thing that it would be well worth the first planting to go ahead and take that chance. But Wente did not do this down at Greenfield. We went resistant. However, we might be wrong. We might be awfully wrong. We might not have it. Now this phylloxera doesn't work in sand so much. The Lodi districts in the San Joaquin Valley have not had that trouble; it's only in these aluvial, tighter soils where the phylloxera lives better and has that danger.

Teiser: And the Lodi district they plant on..?

Wente: On their own roots. Down at Fresno they plant on their own roots.

Teiser: Around the Paicenes area in San Benito County was where I remember hearing of the first of the recent plantings. Have they had any phylloxera turn up there?

Wente: Well, I believe they have had in earlier days, but this is where Almaden at the present time is planting on their own roots. This is most any man's guess, which is smart and which isn't smart.

Teiser: Is there a quality factor?

Wente: Possibly so. Not if your culture is correct. When they're on their own roots they should be pruned back a little more than if they're on the wild roots. You have a flow of sap that probably does not harmonize at the opportune time. You have a falling of blossoms during the setting period when they're on the wild roots, which you will not have when they're on their own roots. So when planting on their own roots, the policy is to really prune back more and don't leave as many fruit buds as you would with the non-resistant.

As far as quality is concerned, do not over-crop, and see that you get a well-ripened fruit. With the vinifers or the European varieties, they do not have the tendency to go with as deep a root system as the wild root, and therefore they cannot carry the crop through quite as easily or as good as the resistant vine.

WINES BEFORE PROHIBITION AND AFTER

Teiser: This brings up a subject which I think that I started to ask you about last time. I don't know how aware you were of these things as a young man before Prohibition. But what about the general level of quality of wine in California before Prohibition as compared with well, say, today?

Wente: Oh, there were some very, very lovely wines in the early days. There really were. There was quite a number of them.

Teiser: What were the really good ones?

Wente: Well, Cresta Blanca as far as white wines were concerned, and as far as Wente was concerned, we didn't do any bottling here and my father--I pointed that out to you the other day--came home very proud of himself from the 1915 fair that he said, "I won four medals and didn't exhibit the wine," that he had sold to A. Finke's widow and William Hoelscher and those others that all got gold medals and they

Wente: were all Wente's wines, and he said, "I came home with four medals but did not receive the medals."

So, this is what happened there in that particular case, however, there were many others: Chauche & Bon, which turned out some awfully good red wines here in Livermore. And then we talked about the Olivina, turned out some lovely wines here in early days. And also the Duvalls here in Livermore. And you go up Napa way and there were many, many, many plants up there that turned out lovely wines that have since fallen by the wayside and never came back after Repeal.

Teiser: What wine types that were notably good before Prohibition?

Wente: They did not go into varietals as much. They went into generics rather than the varietals, and copied principally after the European varieties such as sauternes and chablis hock. Hock was quite a famous one at that time.

Teiser: What was hock?

Wente: Hock was principally a very light Rhine wine, principally of a Burger type of a grape, and it was used very much around the restaurants where there was considerable consumption and the price wasn't so high. It was a cheap Rhine wine which was very acceptable to the trade. Lots and lots of the restaurants in San Francisco used the hock, because after my father became associated with Napa & Sonoma we shipped down a lot of hock wine into Napa & Sonoma, which was bottled and sold around the restaurants.

Teiser: Are there any other wines of that kind that we no longer have?

Wente: Well, this thing changes somewhat, like women's hats. They go into fashion and they go out again. [Laughter] After Repeal we started vintages quite a lot, and then they went out of style more or less, and then we dropped a lot of our vintages and now we're going back into them again. And I think that as far as varietals are concerned, Wente started them when Herman was the principle factor in that.

Wente: Along about 1936 we started out with Sauvignon blanc. That was the first varietal wine that I can recollect was bottled here in California, in 1936, was our Sauvignon blanc. Then we felt that had sold very well and we then started out with Semillon and the Pinots, Pinot Chardonnay and Pinot blanc, and then we had a Mourestel. We had a red wine which we sold on the Mourestal which became very popular, but we've dropped it since. Then we had the Ugni blanc which sold very well and was very much on the order of the old hock variety, light and acceptable, but it wasn't too long before they started to sell it and people didn't know how to pronounce the name. You know, it's spelt "Ugni" and pretty soon everybody called it "Ug-ny" instead of "You-ny," and they really wanted to know where that "Ugny" Wente wine was. [Laughter] So we thought we'd better drop it, so we don't bottle any more of that "Ugny" wine.

Teiser: I was talking to Mr. Horace--no, it was Mr. Harry Baccigaluppi who said he thought Mr. Lanza was the first one to import that grape.

Wente: Well, that's what Horace thinks. I told you the other day about Mr. Bonnet and his brother from the Montpellier Nursery, and that my father bought a number of varieties, and one of them was Ugni blanc. And that was brought in in 1912. That was long before Horace Lanza ever came into the picture of wines. Then Horace Lanza went into it in a big way down south and started out, and he called it--I don't know if he calls it Ugni blanc or not, but Mr. Wetmore brought some in from Europe, and they called it Saint-Émilion and didn't call it the Ugni blanc. It goes under three different names. I forget the other one [Trebbiano] but Saint-Émilion comes to me very quickly, and the Ugni blanc. Wetmore called it Saint-Émilion, and I've looked at his vines a number of times and I'm sure that they are the same variety.

Teiser: Yes, in Dr. Amerine and Dr. Winkler's booklet, California Wine Grapes* they are given as the same. And they weren't recommended.

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*Amerine, M.A. and Winkler, A.J., California Wine Grapes, University of California Agricultural Experiment Station Bulletin 794, 1963.

Wente: This is right. A lot of things can happen to even a poorer variety. You can make a fairly decent wine--I don't say a good wine--out of a Thompson Seedless if you don't overbear it, and bring it down so it has a chance to mature, to use it for a wine purpose, and not hope to get 15 or 20 tons to the acre out of it. But you can get four or five tons to the acre out of a Thompson Seedless, which will give you a much superior wine than you could make out of it with a 15 ton crop. However, I wouldn't recommend it, because you can do so much better with the Ugni blanc, and get four or five tons to the acre, and you can do much better from the Chenin blanc than you can from the Ugni blanc by getting four or five tons to the acre, and you can do better yet by going to the Pinot blanc or the Pinot Chardonnay, so that it would be silly to try to start in with something that has a basic poorness to begin with to make a good quality thing when you know very well that you can reach up to the top and get something better. It's just that simple, I think. However, you shouldn't condemn it entirely.

Even the old Mission grapes that the Fathers brought in here went back to the history of viticulture. There's no doubt that Robert Livermore brought in grapes into the Livermore Valley here along in the 1830's when he first came into Livermore here and planted grapes, and the old Padres brought them in the early days, and principally all the Mission varieties that were of Spanish origin. It has no great quality asset at all. It's just the vin ordinaire. And then when we started in production here, we went into these better varieties. You can do so much better with a Zinfandel or a Carignane or some of these others, and then you get into the Pinots and the red wines, and the Pinot noirs and the Beaujolais, Gamay Beaujolais, you can do so much better than you could with the Zinfandel or the Mataro or the Carignane.

Teiser: Was there much wine made from Mission grapes just before Prohibition?

Wente: In the early days there was quite a little, but in the latter days they were pulled out very much, destroyed.

Teiser: About 1900, say?

Wente: About 1900 there was quite a lot of Mission grown. Yes, they are a heavy producer and a very vigorous grower, and you can get a lot of production of them.

Teiser: Had they pretty well disappeared by 1918?

Wente: Yes, yes. They were used very little for wine purposes by that time.

Teiser: Are any used now?

Wente: I don't know of any that's being used at the present time.

Teiser: You were saying that there were some very good wines produced before Prohibition. It's hard to ask you to even consider all California wines taken together, because they certainly vary, but would you say that the general quality of wines is higher now than it was then?

Wente: No, I don't think so. I would say that then there was not so very much blends made down in the interior valley. They were all principally grown in the coastal valleys like Sonoma and Napa and Livermore and Santa Clara, and those valleys, and there were all wine varieties. Thompson Seedless was unheard of in my youth, and around 1900 somebody came along with the Thompson Seedless and propagated it and it went like wild-fire as far as the wineries in the [Central] Valley were concerned. And it is very profitable too, as far as that goes. You've got a three-way route to go, whereas with wine grapes you've only got one route to go. They can go for table or raisins or wine. And you can't do this with Zinfandel and you can't do it with Pinots.

PROFITS AND LOSSES

Wente: We tried some Sémillons and Sauvignon blancs for eastern shipment when Prohibition went into effect, and we just didn't get to first base. They were too tender, too thin skinned, and by the time they reached the New York market, why they were full of mold and they just didn't hold up. And we didn't know how to pack them either. We probably didn't handle them correctly. But they were a mess. We took nothing but red ink. Whereas the old Alicante had a tough hide, and the home winemaker bought the Alicante and Thompson Seedless, which were all good shippers, and blended the two together and made himself some home-made wine.

Teiser: Someone was telling me that he shipped Zinfandel grapes East during Prohibition.

Wente: We shipped a lot of Zinfandel here, too. We learned how to pack them and we did quite well, but not as well as we did with the Alicantes. As soon as we could change over, we went the Alicante route, as fast as we could, for shipment.

Teiser: Did you ship a good deal during Prohibition?

Wente: We shipped a good deal, and it was amazing the amount of money we received for the first few years of it. Then we started to receive red ink along, about 1928 when the markets were glutted and there were so many carloads in the eastern market. California at that time, as I remember rolled at least a hundred thousand carloads of grapes to eastern markets alone.

Teiser: A year?

Wente: A year. And that's a lot of grapes. If you figure twenty tons for the carload, that means quite a lot of grapes are rolling into one market. And buyers used to buy from us direct, and after that when the grapes became plentiful they would buy only on option markets, and it got so we were getting nothing but red ink. So we quit, and I stayed with my cattle and made an honest to goodness cow man out of me. [Laughter] I could at least sell a few of their

Wente: hides out here in Livermore.

Teiser: In the years before 1928 had people seen that the grape business was lucrative and come in and planted more acreage?

Wente: That, and it also had something that no other industry has. Rich people came into it as a hobby and loved to grow grapes and so forth.

Teiser: In the '20's?

Wente: Yes. It's very intriguing--there's no question about that--more than any other department of agriculture or anything that you can grow. I don't know of anybody or any industry that has more people of hobby nature. [Laughter]

Teiser: It sounds so easy.

Wente: It does sound easy. [Laughter] But it is interesting to grow something and see what you can make out of it in the ultimate. It really is. It's also very interesting to grow out a good calf and see how well it will grow up and what it looks like and then to have it killed and see how it cuts up into sausages. [Laughter] It's just about as intriguing as growing grapes, however. And livestock and wine making are where these rich people really had hobbies.

I've had a lot of fun but I had to eat out of it. Most of these fellows made their money on the stock market or some other way, but I didn't know enough to do that. I made it the hard way. [Laughter] I only went at it in a small way too, compared to some of them.

Teiser: It looks as if it has been worth it anyway.

Wente: Well, I'm now 79 years old and I've done very well.

Teiser: It apparently preserves youth...

Wente: Oh, I think that anybody that would want to preserve their youth, and if they have a good body to begin with, they can exercise enough and watch their diet a little bit. It doesn't make too much difference whether you're working in an office, or even if you're

Wente: in a prison and live in an eight-foot room. I believe that I would have to have my exercise. I'd jump around and turn hand springs in that eight-foot room in order to get my exercise, because I know that I feel better when I get my exercise--don't you?

Teiser: Yes, I certainly do.

Wente: I think this is the way the Lord made you. I guess that's the way it should be done, anyway. I'm of that opinion. Just because I've lived to be 79, it isn't because I've been drinking good wine all the time. It's because I've gotten enough exercise growing it, I think.

Teiser: I'm trying to contrast the period before Prohibition with the period following Prohibition, and I think you answered some questions. But the distribution of California wines was in quite a different pattern was it than today?

Wente: Yes, this was very true. All commodities were. Lack of transportation...we didn't have any trucking facilities. Everything had to go via railroad or water. And those that catered to the markets were in the specified cities where they were selling their merchandise, because they couldn't truck it or get it over. Even those wines that we shipped to Oakland were bottled in Oakland and sold in Oakland. And my father shipped to San Francisco; that was bottled in San Francisco. Unless it went to the big distributors like Lachman & Jacoby. Then they again must have shipped it all over the world in barrels and so forth, and it was bottled in their respective cities where they sold it, and was catered to the trade. Today we're bottling it here and it goes in the bottle all over the world, because your transportation is simple and what have you, and our methods of doing business is different.

You've got to remember that life wasn't as simple as far as business was concerned in the early days. People didn't trust each other like you do now. We ship wine over to Australia or somewhere, and no sight-draft bill of lading attached to the bill at all. We wait until they receive their billing and then await their checks.

Wente: In the early days that just wasn't true. You couldn't do this. You just simply had to collect before it was shipped. You worked on a closer margin, too. Things worked on a very close margin. I think I discussed with you the other day about my father talking about it. He made two and a half a ton on the time that he crushed the grapes until he delivered the wine at the depot at Livermore in puncheons, and he was doing all right.

Well, today, we can't even open the winery here without having about a fifteen to twenty dollar spread to take care of the taxes and the insurance and the bonds and everything else that goes with it, before we dare say, "Well, we're ready to crush."

Well, he didn't have any bonds, he didn't have any taxes to pay, no Social Security, no unemployment [payments]. If a man wanted to leave, he just pulled a checkbook out of his pocket and said, "O.K., Joe, I'll give you a check." And the man he had to account with was his banker, that he didn't overdraw his account. And if he did that the banker would stop him pretty quick. So that was the only bookkeeping he had to do. And he didn't have any income tax, no bond indebtedness, no tax on the wines and nothing. Everything was free-flowing.

I wouldn't dare go out here in the field and ask one of these Mexicans to quit without he'd have to come to the office and hand in his Social Security number and everything else. It'd take the girl a half hour to make out his check. Good Lord, just think of the time consumed, the cost of those things alone which government compels us to do. And its all right--it's a good form of life we're living in. But nevertheless everything's so damned high that it just brings up the cost of all things, and this is the way she is.

Right now a man has a Social Security number and withholding and everything else that goes with it. It just takes a lot of time. Three people work in this office. One and one-half of them are working for the government. They're not working for Wente but they're on Wente's payroll, and somebody's got to pay for it. Then the buyer of the commodity--the one that we have to charge for it.... I learned a long time ago that you had to have more come in the

Wente: back door than goes out the front door, or pretty soon you close the front door. [Laughter]

Teiser: Well, considering the amount of inflation, I wonder if a bottle of your wine sells for much more now that it did before Prohibition--really. Considering the decreased value of money. Since you didn't bottle it before you don't have figures, but I wonder if a comparable bottle costs so much more.

Wente: I think, if you went to dinner in San Francisco, Fisherman's Wharf, before Prohibition you could get a moderately good bottle, a fifth of wine, for about six bits. Today they charge you around two dollars, two and a half.

Teiser: Well, considering wages, I wonder if that's such an increase. In the meantime perhaps your industry has kept itself in efficient order and kept the price quite reasonable compared to the total cost of living.

Wente: I think we probably have, but our costs--well, they're high.

TECHNIQUES AND TASTES

Wente: We don't have any spoilage any more. We're so much better equipped than my father was in his day running his place--so much better equipped. When I stop to think of how many people he had trying to crush these grapes by hand, and hauling the grapes in via horses, and handling them three, four, five times before they got into the crusher. And then he had no cooling facilities, and they had to get into the tank and shovel out the pomace, and all the pumping. Before he had electricity here he had to pump all the tanks by one of the old hand-pushing pumps and that all took manpower, and of course manpower in those days was cheap. But we're doing so much better a job than he could possibly do, with this modern machinery, because of our cooling facilities and everything. If we watch it we don't have any spoilage here at all.

Teiser: According to Dr. [William V.] Cruess, there was a very high percentage of spoilage in the early days.

Wente: Yes, yes--this is right. And you could thank a lot of this [improvement] to Dr. Cruess and a few more of the good, smart technicians.

Teiser: What did you do with your spoiled wine?

Wente: Distillery. It went at half a cent a point of alcohol. In other words, if you had 12 per cent wine it was worth half a cent per point, or six cents a gallon, and that's about what it's worth today. There isn't much difference. So we watch very closely. We don't have anything to go to the distillery around. We call it D. M.--distilling material. And so we don't have anything but the lees go to the distillery.

Now, if you're in the sweet wine business, this is fine. Like in the interior valley, if you have a distillery attached to your winery. We have a tremendous amount of waste here. We just press our good white grapes--we work so hard to get good quality--press them and don't press them too hard. Then take the pomace out immediately and scatter it out. We're probably throwing away three, four, five dollars a ton, just every ton we bring in here, just get rid of it, whereas we could wash it and make some of the finest cognacs out of it. But you'd have to have a bonded man here and a bonded distillery and everything that goes with it. The value would be so small that it wouldn't pay us.

Now, over in the [central] valley they wash their pomace. They don't even press. They disintegrate it and send it right through the distillery and get what they can off of the high proof. And they make sweet wines out of it.

Teiser: You make two dessert wines now?

Wente: We make the Chateau--we call it now the Chateau Sémillon. We are dropping the Chateau Wente. We feel we have too many varieties. We're just calling it Chateau Semillon. It's surprising. We talked about change of style. These wines have changed somewhat too. Our Chateaus were our biggest sellers

Wente: here. Now, they're way down. They're way down and they stand pretty static. And we make a lovely Chateau, just a lovely Chateau. And it doesn't move.

Teiser: When were they your biggest seller?

Wente: Oh, before Prohibition we shipped a lot of Château d'Yquem. We called it Château d'Yquem then. And we shipped a lot if it to Napa & Sonoma Wine Company. It was the principal wine that my father won the four prizes at the--gold medals--at the 1915 fair [laughter] of which he was so proud. He was just raving about how he got more gold medals than anybody else.

Teiser: Well, it is not in the category of fortified wines?

Wente: No, no. Fortified wine is over 14 per cent. We're still in the dry wine class. They change at 14 per cent alcohol between the sweet wines and the dry wines. While we make a sweet Sémillon, a sweet wine, we're classifed in the Alcohol Tax Unit's eyes as a dry wine because we're under 14 per cent. And they classify us as that for the reasons that it bears a 16 cent per gallon tax under 14 per cent alcohol, and anything over 14 per cent bears a 32 cent tax. So you see they classify sweet wines as a 32 cent tax wine.

Teiser: A number of people have commented upon the fact that immediately after Repeal, Americans seemed to favor sweet wines, and there has been a drift to table wines. What did you do?

Wente: We sold no fortified wines of any kind. But our method of operation here--people didn't know how to drink wines, let's say. By and large, [during] Prohibition, they all drank hard liquor and highballs and fruit juices and what have you. So when we tried to convert them into wine drinking we started them off with the Chateau or sweet Sémillon and then to the haute sauterne and then to the dry sauterne, and pretty soon they learned to drink these dry wines. And they were our biggest sellers at that time, these sweeter ones. And now the younger people that come and visit us, even though they're just in their

Wente: teens or getting into their maturity, just 21 years old, all ask for the dry wines, which they didn't do in the early days. Now whether or not they have been taught to drink along the line, the change has come nevertheless, and they're asking for these dry dinner wines. And the market is growing so rapidly that I doubt the quality wineries, at the rate of growth it's going, will be able to supply them with wines.

We're running a nursery as well as running a vineyard here, and we sold this year (off of this little certified nursery down there) 1,300,000 sticks to be planted--vines. All the way from Washington down to Arizona. And, if you can try to visualize it, it takes 450 of these sticks--vines--to the acre. And you divide that into 1,300,000. That all came off of this one little plot of ours. And this is probably a very small percentage of actually what was planted. This is probably only five per cent of the plants that went in. The rest have been gotten somewhere else. So you can just run that through your mind, how many acres are going into this grape business.

We're going into another depressed feeling like I was telling you about in the nineteen hundreds where we really ran into trouble--the wine industry did, and my father did and the rest of them were just beside themselves, what to do next. Everybody had grapes and no market for wines because it was just a flooded market. There was a depression on in the early 'nineties--there was a depression on and nobody had any money. Remember, this is a luxury commodity and the people during the depression--they've got to buy food and shoes for their kids before they buy our wine.

Teiser: People get used to drinking wine with their meals. I wonder how quickly they drop it.

Wente: Well, if you don't have money, you're going to drop it, aren't you?

Teiser: Maybe you're going to drink cheaper wine.

Wente: Well, even then. The people who are hurt are the low income people rather than the high income people.

Wente: High income people that are really taking care of themselves will be able to take care of themselves as far as their personal habits are concerned. But the low income people are always running from day to day. And the depression really affects them more than it does the high income people, so the vin ordinaire maker's going to feel it probably worse than the quality industry.

Teiser: In the meantime, the vin ordinaire people are trying to upgrade their products too, aren't they?

Wente: This is right, and this is all right, too, as far as we're concerned. I think that on my trip over to Europe some years ago, I felt then that the California vin ordinaire was so superior to the European vin ordinaire that there was no comparison.

Teiser: I've just been in Italy, drinking just the carafe wine most of the time, and our very inexpensive wine is better.

Wente: This is right. And I don't know if it's true of the quality, but I know it's true of the quality that they send over here to the states principally. When you're over there you can get some awfully fine quality wines. But some of it's just too bad to drink. I'd rather have a cup of coffee. When I was over there, I'd rather have a cup of coffee. [Laughter] One of the reasons for that is the poor handling. They'd bring it in in barrels or half-barrels and they'd siphon off of that barrel until it's all gone, and then it's refilled and it's not properly washed and the volatile acids are climbing because they don't take care of it properly. They must make some pretty good vin ordinaire wines over there, same as they do here. Except I think probably they wash their pomace too, and rework it, whereas we throw it away. Even large operators here don't wash their pomace and turn it back into piquette, as the Italian calls it. Our vin ordinaire people high-proof it and run it through the distillery and use it for fortifying material, and that's one of the reasons why we are having better vin ordinaire wines here.

Any other questions I can help you with now?

Teiser: Yes, lots! [Laughter] We are nowhere near through.

C.H. Wente, founder of Wente Bros., Livermore, Alameda County, California, Photograph courtesy of Wine Institute.

Ernest A. Wente and Herman Wente, 1960. Photograph courtesy of Wente Bros.

Herman Wente, 1956. Photograph by Mercer courtesy of the Wine Institute.

Ernest A. Wente, 1946. Photograph by Ronald Partridge courtesy of the Wente Bros.

Wente: Well, fire away!

HERMAN L. WENTE AND THE WENTE FAMILY

Teiser: I'll go back then now to something we were talking about earlier, your account of your and your brother's early years. What years did you go to Davis?

Wente: I was up at Davis in 1908, before they had a regular class up there.

Teiser: Until when?

Wente: Until 1912. I didn't go every semester, but I went there whenever I could.

Teiser: And your brother Herman, he was younger than you?

Wente: Yes.

Teiser: And he went through the local schools here, did he?

Wente: Yes, he went to the local high school here. I went two years to the local high school, and then I left and then I went to Davis. He finished high school here and went to U.C.

Teiser: I see. And he studied enology, did he?

Wente: Oh, somewhat. He worked under--I think Dr. Cruess; I'm not positive of that, but it seems to me I can remember Dr. Cruess talking about having Herman in his class.

Teiser: And what years was he there?

Wente: He graduated in 1915. You see the plaque over here? The 1915 class gave him that plaque. That's a picture of the 1915 class. They used to come out here and visit him every year, that same group. When Herman passed away, they sent this plaque up here. And so I put it up here in Herman's office. This was Herman's office, when I occupied that one of Karl's.

Wente: We call that the "farm office," and this is the "winery office" here.

Teiser: Let me read this onto the tape: "To Herman Wente, a loyal Californian and a staunch friend, this memorial is dedicated by his classmates of 1915," and then a list of names. The Wine Institute presented another plaque, did it not, which is outside. There are photographs of that.

Could you outline your brother's career? I know it has been written about but perhaps you can explain it in a little different way.

Wente: Well, of course, Herman was a more friendly type than I. He loved people. I love outdoors. I never felt as much at ease in a group of people as Herman did, and so he did the public relationship and the promotional work for us and I did the agricultural work, which I would rather do. So it worked out very nicely. Other than that I can't tell you much more about him except that he was probably one of the most popular fellows around the Bohemian Club and so forth, of which he was a staunch member along with brother Carl. And I will say this the times I was down there, everybody seemed to think that Herman was more popular than brother Carl [laughter] and anybody that can hold that distinction was doing pretty well for himself, I thought.

Brother Carl thinks so too. He tells about the time when he went back to Washington, when he was president of the Bank [of America] on some financial matters, and he went into the Treasury Department and was laying down his proposition before the group, and one of the fellows spoke up and said, "Are you any relation to these fellows who make this good wine?" [Laughter] It's usually the other way around. When I go up to the city, why it's, "Oh, are you a brother to Carl? Is your brother Carl Wente, president of the Bank of America?" But this time it was the other way around, and it pleased him very much. And it was done by Herman; it wasn't done by me.

Teiser: Was he particularly interested in the technique of wine making?

Wente: Yes, he was pretty much interested in the technique of wine making and also the varietal grapes to put into the making of the better wines, yes. And he watched over the blends very carefully, which we now do collectively. Herman used to do this pretty much along with Bruno.

Bruno--by the way, Bruno Canziani is our winemaker, along with Frank Garbini. Bruno's father worked with me years and years ago, and when Bruno graduated from high school, his father asked me if I could find a place for Bruno, and I said, "Fine." And he is here yet. He came here in 1934, along with Mr. Kirkman. He's my neighbor boy over there. And also, Adele, the hostess here. They all came the same year.

Teiser: You were starting to tell me last time their names. Adele's name is...?

Wente: Kruger.

Teiser: And Mr. Kirkman's first name?

Wente: Albert. He's taken charge of the office and Adele has taken charge of the--well, she was our forelady when we were bottling by hand. And she took care of all of the girls. We had twelve girls putting labels on. Now we do it all machinery-wise and so we made her our hostess, so she's been our hostess and takes people around here on guided tours.

Teiser: When did you put in automatic bottling equipment?

Wente: Oh, semi-automatic about eight years ago. Fully automatic here five years ago.

Teiser: So you took care of the field and your brother took care of the technology and the marketing...

Wente: The sales. Now, I started to tell you that he took care of the blending and so forth, which we now do collectively, Karl and I and Bruno and Frank Garbini, and we have a young fellow starting out here who is going to take my place one of these days. I'm backing away from this just as quick as I can. His father and I used to work together driving mules for my father along in 1906. And he's working here with

Wente: us, now. He's been here three years. He's a graduate of Fresno State. His name is Robert Detjens. Very capable young man. And you're going to hear a lot about him as time goes on. He's going to be our understudy to Karl around here, as Kirk and I disappear.

Teiser: Your brother died in...

Wente: '61.

Teiser: '61.* By then your son Karl had come in and was well-established in the business?

Wente: Yes. So instead of being "Wente Brothers," it's "Wente and Sons." He has two sons now who we hope will be Wente Brothers again one of these days. So we were rather loath of changing our label brand there over from Wente Brothers. We are trying to impress "Wente Wines." We are constantly advertising "Wente Wines," "Wente Wines," instead of "Wente Brothers." And even though he's got a pair of brothers coming up, we are still working on "Wente Wines" and maybe we'll change our corporation's name to Wente Wines instead of Wente Brothers. Whether it's smart or not, I don't know, but this is what we're doing at the present time--we're calling it "Wente Wines" owned by Wente Brothers, Incorporated.

Teiser: Are there any other boys in that same generation as your sons' sons? Did your sisters have grandchildren who are interested in this business at all?

Wente: Well, I have one sister [Hilma] who is married to a chap by the name of [Edwin E.] Hagemann who owns this piece of vineyard land over here that Almadem is now leasing. He has a son, but he's a tomato farmer and vegetables, and that sort of thing.

Teiser: Not interested in wine?

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*Herman L. Wente was born November 4, 1892, at the family home on the winery property and died in Boston, while undergoing medical treatment, on April 16, 1961.

Wente: He's a big operator, really. He's something like me, I guess. He just can't help it but he likes heavy lifting. I guess that's a bad fault to have. [Laughter]

Teiser: So there's just your son's two sons, really.

Wente: Well they're the only ones who have any interest in this thing, anyway. You see, Herman and I owned this thing entirely. Brother Carl was out entirely when father disbanded C. H. Wente, Incorporated, which was the family corporation and then quit and divided everything up and sold us, and gave each one so much money, and then he valued everything down to a dollar basis. He was a great dollar man [Laughter] He said he could divide a dollar right down to the penny but he couldn't divide a piece of property down that thin. Somebody's going to be very unhappy. So he said, "I'm going to divide it all down to dollars while I'm alive," and I think that's about as sound a philosophy as a father can possibly use. You have no family troubles at all. If anybody felt that they were badly treated they had nothing to say about it because this is the way Pops set it up.

Teiser: He lived to see the end of Prohibition, didn't he?

Wente: Yes, yes. He had a tremendous head on him. He really was quite an outstanding individual for a man of that education. I bear on that fact, education. Heck, he was about as well educated as they come, but he never got any further than the third grade. But he was constantly reading. He could recite the bible, by golly, verbatim, and he'd just read, read, read, all the time. He was pretty well educated, and he could talk about the chemical analysis of wines and he was pretty well versed on it and knew what he was talking about.

Teiser: Did he advise you and your brother when you took over?

Wente: Oh, yes. Yes. Of course, there was nothing much to advise then. Prohibition came into effect then.

Teiser: That's when you went into making wines that you distributed through Beaulieu...

Wente: Oh, yes. But then Herman had that all pretty well in hand without any technical advice.

Teiser: Did your father remain interested in your...

Wente: He lived right over in the old home, here. He remained here until he died. He kept a life interest in the old family home, and when he died, he left it for mother to have a life interest in the home. She lived in the house there, and we watched over her, and when she died we tore down the house. Bruno moved in it first, and then we tore it down on account of the fire hazard and danger to the plant. Rebuilt it and built it further back.

Teiser: Was your father pleased at the way you and your brother handled the winery?

Wente: Well, I think he should be, although he never was a very expressive man. He thinks praise was about as big a folly as you could possibly do, you know. [Laughter] You could always do better. Didn't I tell you--he always had little phrases about little things, like this:

> There were two fellows climbing a hill and they got awfully tired, and when they got halfway up the hill one of them was crying to beat the band. When they got near the top, he started laughing and seemed to be very happy. Then when he got up on top he sat down and cried again. Now why did he sit down and cry? Because he saw another hill ahead of him that was higher than the hill he just climbed, so don't ever think that you are on top at any time. There's always another hill ahead of you.

[Laughter] That was his philosophy. I think it was pretty good, too.

Teiser: It seems to be the way life is arranged.

Wente: That's the way life is arranged. You think you're there, but you're never there, so he sat down and cried again.

Letter from Herman Wente to Wine Institute in reply to a request for biographical information. 1941.

Growers & Producers
of
CHOICE WHITE WINES
SINCE 1883

Genuine
VALLEdeORO
WINES

REC'D. OCT - 7 1941
HAC ..... LDA .....
WENTE BROS.
Note ..... E. A. Reply
H. L. WENTE
Retain .... PHONE Ret. to ll .....
File ..... Copy to .....
JEP ..... RLS .....
LRG ..... Export .....
DG ..... Library .....
LIVERMORE, CALIF. ..... Duty .....
CR ..... Dir. Service .....
Refer to .....

Attention: Miss MacLachlan,

Here's my pedigree:—

Born and raised on same property we now operate.
Learned wine-making from my father, C. H. Wente. Continued making wine in same winery thruout entire life, starting faiat to fill barrels when small boy.
Spent 1 year at U of C under Prof Baiolette taking mostly viticulture,—
During prohibition made sacramental wine.
After repeal — you know the story.

Thank You. Herman Wente

CHANGES

Teiser: I once had a very interesting little conversation with your brother Carl, and I know that he's proud of the way the two of you handled the winery. He was kind of bragging about it. One of the things he mentioned that you had done so well was keep up your cooperage all during Prohibition.

Wente: Well, of course, this is right. We were dead ducks otherwise. Most of these wineries went into a terrible, terrible state after Repeal, when they started to re-use the old wineries again. They got full of mold and full of acids and full of tourne, which is a bacteria. Most of the cooperage in California was full of tourne. This bacteria grew during the quiet period of non-usage. But we kept ours active and watched it very carefully so when Repeal came, when most of these other wineries were having such a tremendous amount of trouble, getting reorganized, using their cooperage over again--a little carelessly, maybe, not cleaning them properly, and not soaking them full of water and not changing the water a dozen times or more and putting sulfur in them and what have you and, well, acids too, as far as that's concerned, to kill the tourne.

They got their wines infected and when they were shipped to the East, why California received one of the worst reputations. Bum stuff. And it wasn't so much that the wines when they were made were bad, but they were in this badly infected cooperage and it was shipped back there and it just was terrible. By the time it reached there the total volatile acids were high, and it was full of bacteria and the Eastern market wouldn't absorb it, and of course the European wines came in and took over. It took a long time to overcome that. It took a long time.

Teiser: I never knew that.

Wente: This is one of the reasons for it. Even the old plants took many years to get re-cooperated. Now they're swell.

Wente: Now today we're using stainless steel cooperage. I probably won't live to see the day, but you probably will or your children, my children, grandchildren will, when most of this wooden cooperage will be dispensed with entirely, and with stainless steel there is no seepage. And they say that these wines need wood and oxygen. True, they do, but you can do it with other methods than letting them seep through wood. You can do it by proper handling. It's so much simpler and easier to make wine than it was when I was a boy the way my father handled it. Couldn't help himself.

I can remember when we went to bed with candles here. We had no central heating in the house, and we grew eucalyptus tree wood for power. And this held true for cooking for the men--for the heating of the houses. And we used coal oil lamps, and in the wineries we used candles. We had no electricity at all. We used nothing but candles throughout the winery. Whenever you walked around in there, you had to walk around with candles.

This was 1904 when we first got electricity here. In 1896 my father got a gasoline engine here and he thought he was in heaven. He got a big gasoline engine. And then when he got it here he couldn't run the darn thing because it was so complicated. So he hired a little man by the name of West. The West family out of Stockton. He was an engineer and he used to come over here during vintage season and sit there in that chair--I can remember him as a little kid--see old Mr. West sitting there, just sitting there reading a book. He was keeping that engine running. That's all that my father wanted. We had a big central shaft where he took all his power for his presses and his pumps off of it with belts.

But that was so crude and so obsolete even then. Now we have a motor in every piece of equipment. You don't have this great central power in the center.

Teiser: How did your father filter wine. What kind of filtering was done then?

Wente: By hand. Pumped all the wine up in the tower of the winery by hand and let it run down through the

Wente: filter by gravity.

Teiser: What kind of filters did you use?

Wente: Paper pulp. Every morning we'd wash the paper pulp out in the filter washer. And this is about as crude and as dangerous of infection as it could possibly be, but we'd keep washing and washing; take one hour to wash the filter. But you didn't do as much filtering as we do now.

We did more clarification. By clarifying, by putting in tannin, by putting in gelatin, that sort of thing. We were constantly throwing down the deposits by clarification methods. We got a lot of these clarification methods from Europe, and I was reading the other day about one of their biggest Russian trades for their carp--I believe it's carp. One of their fish. The air container that the fish has in its body so they can float. And they scraped these air balloons and sold it to Europe for clarification of their fine wines. And I was talking to my wife about this, and I said, "Now Bess, how come?" "Well," she said, "that's nothing but gelatin. It's a gelatin out of the fish."

My wife used to teach chemistry. It's an interesting thing, when we started here, Herman's wife kept the books in 1934, and my wife did the chemistry work.

Teiser: I've been told that in that earlier period there was not so much premium put upon a brilliant look to wine.

Wente: That is right, too. You expected to buy a bottle of wine--if it had a crust inside of it, why, you felt better about it. The deposits would go out to the sides of the bottle--cream of tartar--so the tartrates would settle on the outside of the bottle. Today we can't do this. The American is a very "eye" buyer. I'll put it this way: You go into the store, and these stores that don't display their merchandise well on the shelf, you just don't buy it. You just go to one that does. You wouldn't buy a bottle of wine on the shelf today that wasn't clear.

Teiser: The buyer used to have to decant the wine then?

Wente: Very carefully, yes. This is one of the things that brother Herman complained always about. Decanting very carefully. Buy these crusted wines if you can get them, and be careful and decant them and don't shake them. Put them in a decanter. He had three or four of them in his home where he decanted his wines very carefully.

Teiser: I don't think that buyers now know about it?

Wente: No. We're selling them here, though, of course. We call them "pourers" rather than "decanters." Put the bottle on the shelf in that little decanter and you can tip it then and pour it out very carefully.

Teiser: Even if it's not necessary now. [Laughter] Now you do some clarification?

Wente: Oh, yes, we do some clarification now, but nothing like we used to. We have better clarification material too, and we have machinery that works. We have these big filters that we mix up our filterate. Our filtering and our caring for wines is so much better. It's a pleasure to work with it compared to the other.

Another thing: our economic situation. Still in my father's day you had to work with a close margin in everything you did. So us fellows that worked on the ranch here, on a nice day like this, we'd be out plowing the vineyards. If it rained, we came in and started to pump wine and filter wines, and we didn't keep a crew of men the way we are doing here in the winery today.

Teiser: I'd like to ask you next time something about the Prohibition period and Repeal.

(Interview #3 - May 13, 1969)

THE PROHIBITION PERIOD

Teiser: It's hard to get information at this late date on the Prohibition period and on how wine got into illegal channels. Were there people in the industry, of respectability, who were on the borderline of bootlegging?

Wente: Well, there were some doing it, and we did not. I'll be frank about it: we did not. I was brought up--our family was brought up--to obey the law. And therefore, when Prohibition came, our father said, "This is not for me. I'm quitting. So you fellows can do as you feel like with the ranches." But he impressed it on us that we were to stay legitimate and we did. I went to farming, as I told you.

Teiser: What I really was perhaps leading up to was: was it possible for people who made wine to find that when the wine got beyond their control it went into illegal channels? Did this happen, and was it a difficulty for a wine grower not to control his output in this way?

Wente: Oh, this happened more on the Eastern markets which we didn't know too much about. I think I told you that we sold to Beaulieu Vineyards, and then he shipped it on to those agencies in Chicago and undoubtedly a lot of that got into illegal channels. I don't know. I don't know whether Mr. de Latour knew whether or not it did as long as he got clearance from the government and was given an O.K. I can't see that he could be responsible. It's no more responsible than the man who is growing barley and sells his barley, and he doesn't believe in alcohol beverages, and the barley is sold to the brewery. And they make beer out of it. Well, how are you going to stop the poor old farmer who really and truly doesn't want his product to go into alcohol

Wente: and yet it's being sold and used for that purpose in spite of him and all he may do and expect to do.

This has happened with us with the grape. We sold lots of grapes--just a ton here and a ton there to the Italians who I am quite sure made more than their allowable 200 gallons, and that was none of my business.

Teiser: Yes, this is what I wondered--how far the grape grower and winemaker could control it and even felt it necessary...

Wente: How are you going to control anything, no more than you can control peoples' habits? How are you going to stop people from sniffing glue? How are you going to stop people from smoking marijuana when anybody--anybody--can get a few seeds of hemp and grow marijuana and smoke it. I don't know how you're going to stop it. This LSD, that's something else again. That's a chemical compound that's put together. Now I guess somehow you probably could control that. But I don't see how you're going to control marijuana when anybody with any intelligence knows what it is. I've got it growing in my bird seed yard there--the marijuana seed, hemp seed--and the leaves growing there, and we think nothing of it. We just walk right by it. Now, if I wanted to culture it, there would be no problem. I could get some more seed and just grow marijuana in my back yard. Really, this is true. I don't see how you can stop people from buying grapes and making alcohol, with natural fermentation. Whether it's been treated with sugar--they can do this with most any fruits.

I fail to see how the government can actually expect--of course when you get into distilling material, this is different now. This is when you come really down to running a still. Then the government should probably step in. But I fail to see how it could possibly control people's habits.

Teiser: It didn't.

Wente: It didn't, no. And, I think, maybe all our morale--respect for law--has broken down, partly from this laxity during that period. Don't you think so yourself?

Teiser: I suppose.

Wente: Coming back to grapes again. We sold grapes to the scavenger boys in San Francisco through the warehouse company who sold them their hay. They would ask where they could get grapes and I would go down and make arrangements to sell them grapes and deliver them on a Friday to these four or five different houses, and they would work over these grapes, and that was quite an outlet for us for our cheaper varieties. We couldn't sell the fancy varieties like the Sémillon or the Sauvignon blancs to these people. These were Italians who loved red wine and we sold Zinfandel, Carignane and that sort of variety.

Then we put an ad in the French paper in San Francisco that we had the Sémillon grapes for sale, so much per ton, F.O.B. Livermore, and we sold any number of tons to French people we got through the little advertisement in the French newspaper. We contacted one--a butcher, who was a very prominent Frenchman in the French colony in San Francisco. And he sold [for] us more white grapes around San Francisco, but he had no way of delivering them so we finally offered to deliver them. So we delivered grapes all around San Francisco and even sold them barrels. And then they went from there.

Teiser: So, there were plenty of people just making their family allowance?

Wente: Why sure. Because they were allowed 200 gallons, you know, and they were making that allowance.

So, that was during Prohibition. Now, how'd we get back into this thing again? This is what you'd like to know? Well, it was inevitable. I think anyone with a little common sense along about the latter part of the 'twenties--'28, '29, and '30--could see that sooner or later this thing was going to come back because people were sick and tired of the bootlegging that was going on. The alcoholism was getting worse. Skid Row was running wild in San Francisco. And I think the morale of the people was getting lower and lower and finally Roosevelt ran on a platform--and this is the principal thing that elected him, too, I think, more than the

Wente: Depression--poor Mr. Hoover took the attitude that it was a noble experiment. He was by far a more capable president than any man we ever had, and yet he'd fool around and try to carry on this "noble experiment." But then, we prepared ourselves and got our cooperage together, and we had quite an inventory of wine which we were allowed to make before Repeal came.

Teiser: When you could start making wine again?

Wente: We could make it as long as we were under bond. We were allowed to make as much as we felt like, but we couldn't sell it. We were all under bond. If you had a legitimate buyer--and there were some legitimate buyers, you know--we didn't have any. But [Louis M.] Martini, he operated out of Selma then, down below Fresno, and he had all the Upper State New York people with legitimate buyers for his products. But we didn't have any--just Mr. de Latour, and I think we went over that the last time we talked.

FACTORS AFFECTING THE EARLY REPEAL YEARS

Teiser: So by the time Repeal came along, you had built up some stocks of aged wines?

Wente: Yes.

Teiser: Did you and your brother decide you were going to market it, you were going to do this and do that, or did you feel your way along as the situation changed?

Wente: Well, we were still in the Depression. Everything was depressed and people didn't have money to buy wines, let's face it. So we didn't sell a great deal and besides that, why, California wines in the East had an awful bad reputation. I think we went over that the last time. Why, I think we discussed that--the cooperage being spoiled, by lying empty so long and the tourne, the bacteria growth that came

Wente: into it, and by improper treating the cooperage became infected and the wines were bad and the yeast was just bad, most of it.*

Teiser: Did you at first sell some wines in bulk?

Wente: Oh yes, we sold quite a little in bulk. We sold a lot to Cresta Blanca and Mr. L[ucien] B. Johnson. We discussed Cresta Blanca, did we not--the ownership of it changed from Wetmore to the Johnsons, and L[ucien] B. Johnson bought considerable amount of wines. And we sold wine to Beaulieu and a lot of people who had a reputation--bottlers. And we sold some back to Mr. [Frank A.] Busse, who was my father's former partner. If you remember we discussed what became of the Napa & Sonoma Wine Company. My father was president of the Napa & Sonoma Wine Company.

I might just refresh our memory about that. Along about the early nineteen hundreds we were making sauternes--my father was. And he had a good outlet with the Napa & Sonoma Wine Company which was run at that time by Mr. [Emil C.] Priber. Mr. Priber was a rather elderly gentleman and he had Mr. Busse working for him as his superintendant. And, Mr. Priber wanted to sell his interest in Napa & Sonoma Wine Company so my father bought it, and he took in Mr. Busse and one or two other salesmen as stockholders and part owners, but father retained 51 per cent of the stock and became president of the Napa & Sonoma Wine Company. So we called it Napa and Sonoma and Livermore on the labels. We didn't feature Wente at all--just Napa & Sonoma Wine Company.

Teiser: Let me make sure I understood you. Did the label read then for a time: "Napa and Sonoma and Livermore?"

Wente: We featured Napa & Sonoma Wine Company; Napa, Sonoma and Livermore as the three locations. We didn't change the name of the company. And it was my father's request that they did this, that they wanted to feature Livermore, but they were doing so

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*See also page 56.

Wente: well with Napa & Sonoma Wine Company, and so it was not a mandatory deal. Anyhow, Mr. Busse remained manager for the Napa & Sonoma Wine Company until Prohibition came and my father--I think we went over that--my father said, "Now, look, we've made a lot of money out of this, Frank. I'm going to sell you this inventory at cost, give you time enough to sell it before the deadline of Prohibition goes into effect. You keep the labels and trade rights and everything that Napa & Sonoma may have, and it's yours. All I'm asking for is the money out of the inventory."

So, when Repeal came, why Mr. Busse came back to Herman and I and wanted us to go back into it again. And we elected to eventually get started into Wente Brothers and start bottling and labeling under our own name rather than Napa & Sonoma. We sold him some wines, however.

Teiser: Had they been operating during Prohibition?

Wente: No, they didn't.

Teiser: Had they held over any stocks?

Wente: Nothing. They had to start in all fresh with cooperage and tanks and what have you.

Teiser: Did you bottle and label under your own name just after Repeal?

Wente: We started in 1934. We started not immediately after Repeal. We were under Mr. de Latour's bond yet. I think we went into that, did we?

Teiser: Somewhat.

Wente: Well, it was the Alcohol Tax Unit people, along about 1926, said to Mr. de Latour, "You're buying these finished wines from Wente. You're not using them for blending and it's against the law. You cannot buy it as a blending material."

So Mr. de Latour was beside himself what to do. He said, "We have to discontinue buying your wines; we can't use them for blending because they're a

Wente: finished product. Will you consider turning your bond over to Beaulieu Vineyards and calling them "Beaulieu Vineyards II?"

So Herman and I discussed that at great length and we finally decided we would, with the proviso that if Repeal came he would immediately return our bond to us.

Well, Mr. de Latour was rather reluctant to do this in a hurry. He wanted to hold onto us as long as he could and he asked us to go in partnership with him and operate it as a part of Beaulieu Vineyards, which we declined to do.

We felt that we go on our own, and so we did. It took a long time to get established. During that period, wines were so bad through the East that California shipped, and had a bad reputation. It took quite a long while to overcome it.

Even your authorities like Frank Schoonmaker, who criticized wines in general and California wines very severely, we sent him a few cases of wine and told him (it was our first contact with Frank Schoonmaker) that he was mistaken if he called all California wines bad, that California did make a few good wines and we were herewith sending him some via express, and taste them. And he was very much surprised, and he came on out here, and that is how we became acquainted with Frank Schoonmaker.

Teiser: Maybe that was the beginning of the California material in American Wines,* that he and Tom Marvel wrote.

Wente: That's right. He and Marvel were partners at that time, and also in the distribution of wines. Frank Schoonmaker & Company, Tom Marvel had an interest in it.

Teiser: That book must have done a great deal for the general status of California wines.

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*New York: Duell, Sloan and Pearce, 1941.

Wente: It changed the atmosphere quite a little. It really did. He had for a salesman, [Alexis] Lichine. He was one of Schoonmaker's salesmen. He went out on his own.

Teiser: That's interesting that you should have had that part in the general building up of the reputation of California wine.

Wente: This is right. And then of course John Daniel [Jr.] and Herman worked very faithfully towards forming the Wine Institute. My father and the early timers. Mr. Ed Sheean. He was from Sacramento; he was president of what they called the California Grape Growers Association that was formed to enlighten people what Prohibition would do to the vineyards. My father was the treasurer and was instrumental in raising the money to fight Prohibition. This dates way back to 1906 or '08 and '10 when we had the possibilities of the country going dry. It was constantly being fought. And they had speakers on the road talking on the evils of Prohibition, what it would do, and they had signs made and--I think I have a picture of it yet here somewhere. We had a sign on the vineyard there: "Prohibition will destroy these vineyards." [It was] painted on a big sign, and [they] set this all over the country.

And they spent a lot of time and money, and Horatio Stoll was their secretary. He was a native of Sacramento and his father owned a harness shop in Sacramento. Mr. Sheehan--what's the name of that vineyard east of Sacramento? He was the superintendant of that. Out towards Mills. Right in the foothills. Cordova Vineyards. Those hills there, they grew a lot of grapes in there, and now it's all city. Mr. Sheehan was president of the Association. My father was treasurer. Horatio Stoll was the secretary. And Horatio Stoll put out a little publication. He didn't call it California Vines at that time.* Later he changed it over to California Wines and Vines and then he sold it and retired. It was Horatio Stoll who started Wines and Vines. It was from the nucleus of the California Grape Growers Association.

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*Horatio F. Stoll started the California Grape Grower in 1919.

Wente: Herman, Mr. [A. R.] Morrow, John Daniel and a few others formed the Wine Institute. And it was rather difficult for them because the big source of income was derived from the amount of gallonage you produced. And these little wineries like Inglenook and Wente were just a small factor.

Teiser: Well, didn't Mr. Morrow represent a fair number of gallons at the time?

Wente: Yes. However, his organization* was a co-op and not an individual operator. The larger wineries just let Herman and John Daniel take over as much as possible, capitalized on the little quality wineries. All the big advertisements were built right around the nucleus of Cresta Blanca and Inglenook and Krug and what have you. It was less than ten wineries that received most of the advertising, and they didn't pay in one tenth of the money. But it grew.

Teiser: You were thoroughly convinced of the need for such an association I guess?

Wente: Oh yes, sure, because it was an educational program principally. People had forgotten about wines. They really had. They were used to bootleg stuff and all this sort of thing and they didn't know anything about wines. The love for wines died principally with the older people. And I think it's come back remarkably well in the last few years.

Teiser: I wonder if some of the interest in wine didn't come from the young people who since the time of World War II were travelling in Europe and drinking it there.

Wente: The war veterans--First World War veterans--learned how to drink wine over there. They really got all the best wines they possibly could over there. They learned all the outlets of all the better wines over there, and they got away from the vin ordinaire and they got to be quite wine connoisseurs. And it

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*Fruit Industries, Ltd.

Wente: was a big factor also. But it didn't turn, even then, like it has in these last few years. Why, I don't know. Why is it that these young people are coming here visiting us? They just come here in flocks and droves. Some of them hippie types, but most of them are not. Most of them are just good wine lovers, nice people. Getting away from the hard liquors.

Teiser: When did you start, then, bottling your own wines?

Wente: 1934.

Teiser: And did you start with just a few and increase the amount that you bottled?

Wente: Sure. That was all we could do. Didn't have much money, but we had a lot of wine. [Laughter] And Mr. Wetmore said, "Don't get disheartened. You can figure it will take 20 years at least to build up a good, reputable, honest-to-goodness label. In two years you can knock it to pot, but it will take you 20 years to build it up, so go slow. Take it easy and work at it and work at it, and see if you can keep the quality in the glass."

So Herman and I worked along in that direction. Herman spent a great deal of his time with the Wine Institute doing the promotional work, in educational work, copywriting with Caddow and his group of people that they had at the Wine Institute. Leon Adams did quite a job at that time, which was rather sad in the end, but he really did a lot of work for them. He's a little strong opinionated, you know. [Laughter]

THE PRORATE AND BURKE CRITCHFIELD

Teiser: I don't suppose you were in any position where you needed involvement in the prorate program.

Wente: We had very little to do with prorate, except this: the Bank of America was a big factor. The Bank of

Wente: America had Mr. Critchfield* as a vice-president. Burke Critchfield was an agronomy professor in the state of Minnesota, I guess at the University of Minnesota, and the Bank of America hired him as a vice-president for their agriculture. So he came out here and this big factor of surplus grapes came up. Bank of America was very heavily involved.

My brother Carl was instrumental in hiring Mr. Critchfield, along with A. P. [Giannini]. They realized that they had to do something to save their investments or loans to the vineyards, so then they asked the government to create the prorate. They would loan Mr. Critchfield to the prorate administration to put this thing over, which they did.

But Mr. Critchfield never went back to the bank again after that. He's a great friend of mine. I visit him all the time. He's living in St. Helena now. He's retired. I am amazed that the man's alive. He worked so hard on the prorate deal that he just was running around in circles. He didn't even know his name. This is a fact.

He had meetings in Fresno, he had meetings all over and these fellows organized, getting these growers together, and he had a meeting at the Fresno Hotel and so he flew down to Fresno and he got in a cab to go the the hotel and he was so fatigued and his mind was so fatigued that he didn't know his name. So he couldn't tell the cab driver. He knew he had some kind of a meeting somewhere, so he said, "Well, drive me around. I'll gather my senses in a little bit." And they drove around two hours in the cab before he could remember what he came to Fresno for. So he missed the meeting. And he's alive yet. He has one of these trip-hammer minds, you know.

Teiser: I know that people considered him an important factor in the industry.

Wente: Yes, he really has a lot of ingenuity and a lot of ambition. After you talk to him a minute you'll

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*Burke Critchfield was subsequently interviewed in this series.

Wente: understand what I am trying to say. He's the kind of a fellow--"I've got an idea." He'd come over and punch you--"I've got an idea." His ideas were way ahead of me, so fast he frightens you.

ECONOMIC TRENDS

Teiser: The other critical time in the wine industry was in the early 'sixties when they established the set-aside, was it not?

Wente: This I don't know. Oh, yes, you mean here the 1960 set-aside. Yes, but it wasn't but what the industry could work it out itself. It was then a case of balancing. You know, any business, I don't care what it is, it's got to be balanced. Because if you load up your house beyond its ability to hold, you can't take in any more. Now this is what you go through with any agriculture.

This is the sad part about agriculture. They grow crops. Maybe they have balance against them. Maybe they haven't enough crops to satisfy the demand. Then prices go sky high. The next year you plant so doggoned much wheat that it runs out of your ears. Now the automobile people, they can just manufacture so many automobiles, turn the key: we can't sell any more, and this it it. No spoilage. People that are working in it are out of a job but--we in agriculture, we haven't any control over it. We've tried awfully hard, through the Farm Bureau and through the government to control. I remember raising hogs. I raised hogs for three and one-half cents a pound. I raised barley for 32 cents and worked hard to do it. I mean not like you're doing today; you get on these self-propelled harvesters and you can go right along and have a radio going. We did it with a pitchfork in the hard way. And the thing that always griped me, it would just take the heart out of you, after you've worked so hard for it and then you could only sell it for 35 cents. And the merchant that was buying it from you would sell you the sacks for 15 cents to contain one hundred

Wente: pounds of barley. Well, that was all right, but on top of that he'd deduct three-quarters of a pound of your barley because the weight of your sack was three-quarters of a pound, and this took the heart out of me. I didn't mind paying the 15 cents, but when he took the three-quarters of a pound for the weight of the sack for which I paid 15 cents for... this was irony [laughter].

Teiser: Well, the grape business, grape growing has safety valves in a sense, in raisins on the one hand and brandy on the other. That makes it a little different, doesn't it, from grain?

Wente: Yes, somewhat. But one thing about wine, you can put it in the tank and it isn't going to spoil immediately. Now growing vegetables, you're just out of luck. You have a few weeks you go into cold storage and you've got to go out again, but if we can put it in the tank and we do have a glutted market, maybe the holdover 'til next year will not be so malicious and the holdover will balance off. Now this is fine when you're growing a commodity like that, provided you're tied in with a manufacturer that's running a winery or processing plant. But just to grow fruit for a cannery and not have any interest in the cannery, I don't want any part of it. Just to grow grapes for a winery, I don't believe I'd be very much interested in it. I'd rather ride around the hills on a saddle horse and not have people to pay wages to.

Teiser: A marginal winemaker can't hold his wine, can he?

Wente: No, he's got to move on. He's got to be out taking care of the next crop.

Teiser: Has that caused a good deal of attrition? Have lots of wineries gone out of business?

Wente: Well, probably so. They've gone into this co-op deal more and more. Maybe that's good. I don't know. To my way of thinking, a co-op is a first step in socialism. And socialism is a first step to communism. When I was a boy, socialism was a bad word. Today it's not such a bad word. You become socialist, then you become indoctrinated a little bit with communism. It doesn't sound half as bad

Wente: to me as it did some years ago, does it to you?

Teiser: No, and cooperative doesn't sound at all bad to me.

Wente: This is a first step, this transition of revolution of handling commodities.

Teiser: There's government financing available for cooperatives, isn't there, that's not available to you for instance?

Wente: Yes, tax-wise it's a big break. They are not getting the break they were here eight or ten years ago. They were getting a terrific break eight or ten years ago. Today they are paying somewhat of a tax load, but not as much as an independent I don't think.

Teiser: The cooperatives have been more the large not the fine wine producers, haven't they?

Wente: Well, no. Well, the Italian Swiss Colony are the co-op that's formed California Vintners, whatever they call themselves, that's taken over Inglenook...

Teiser: United Vintners?

Wente: United Vintners is the word I was trying to find. They've taken over Inglenook as their brand. But the large distilleries have taken over Cresta Blanca, Schenley's has. And National Distillers has now taken over Almaden, and Paul Masson has gone with the other distillers, and so we're sitting out here kind of on the limb. We don't know whether we'll go with the distilleries...[laughter].

Teiser: Well, there was a period when the large distilleries bought wineries and then they sold them, wasn't that it?

Wente: This was--again you're coming back to the early days when grain was scarce and the distillers were denied the right to use corn for alcohol, or any cereal for alcohol, so they immediately came out to California and bought all of the wine inventory within three months. They bought 50 per cent of California wine inventory, and they held it to convert over to neutral spirits for them. Then grain,

Wente: after a year or so, was released again for distilling material. They were not too happy with the spirits of grapes for their whiskeys and so they started to bottle wines or sold the wineries. The National Distilleries owned the Italian Swiss Colony at one time and they sold it, and now they are back in and bought Almaden.

Teiser: Well, I guess there's a whole trend toward these bigger and bigger combinations.

Wente: Yes. Now this is not only in people or organizations that are processing food, this is happening with everything. I don't know whether it's good or bad for the country. I've always felt there comes a time in everyone's life when they like something of their own. It might just be an automobile or a pencil or something else, but it's mine, and I think we have a happier citizenship with a little country corner grocery store than we do with a large distributing store such as Safeway today, where all you can hope to be is a manager of one of the stores, and this holds true with banks, this holds true--it won't be long--with the wine industry and distillers and what have you. We're all getting so that we just--well, it's a form of communism, isn't it? Later the government will take them.

Teiser: Well, I hadn't looked forward that far.

Wente: I think this is what you'll eventually see. I won't see it, but my grandchildren probably will. They'll be operating this place for government. Now you take a Ford plant, for instance; they created the Ford Foundation and then hold the voting stock of the Ford plant for another family's lifetime, but sooner or later they'll lose it. And this is what's going to happen to Wente Brothers; this is what is going to happen to the rest of them as time goes on.

Teiser: So far, has there been any experience in the California wine industry in which a small winery, when it was bought by a large company, has continued making really excellent wines?

Wente: Well, there was a good demonstration of it out here at Cresta Blanca. Over the last 30 years they were making excellent wines. Management comes in from

Wente: the sales side of it and they had good men, they had good wine people. They had Harold Berg and people like that that are really excellent. But they take the heart out of them. The management's back in New York, and they get a wire that Sauvignon blanc is good, ship us a carload. Well, hell's bells, you've only got one little tank of it, and how are you going to do it? Well, the next wire comes: you're fired, you can't produce; well, we'll give it to somebody that can. And so this is the way this thing works.

Now, Harold had a terrific interest in that place. He just would have loved to have stayed there and made good wines. But, gee, they knock the props right out from under you, and the next thing you know you're here out in the street. All your love for wines doesn't do you a bit of good. If you haven't got a personal interest in this thing, you can't keep on making good wines. You've got to have a personal interest in it, I think.

Teiser: People say, and this ties in with what you've just said, that Eastern distillery people don't understand wine making at all, but maybe some of them will learn.

Wente: Well, people can go to school and learn how to do it. Sure, this is what Harold Berg did, and then he got himself a job with Cresta Blanca, and he had hoped that he would make good wines, which he did, and the result is he's back at the university* and quite satisfied with his position and we're all very happy to see him there as far as that's concerned because we think he's a good man. He was an awfully good man out here too. But, gee whiz, you just can't do a damned thing when management tells you've got to ship me two carloads of 1967 Sauvignon blanc and you only made one carload.

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*As Professor of Enology, University of California, Davis.

DISTRIBUTION AND SALES

Teiser: This leads us into something else that I've been interested in. The system of distribution for wine, now I suppose in your father's day it was direct from the winery?

Wente: Oh, we had large wholesalers. California Wine Association, of which Mr. Morrow was the chemist.

Teiser: Did you sell wine to the California Wine Association?

Wente: Yes. And Lachman [&] Jacoby. And a lot of the bigger--there were any number of large distributors of wines in San Francisco.

Teiser: But you had no firm commitment with any of them, you just sold them as any other customers?

Wente: Just like you do your cattle today. Sell to Armour, Swift's, or.... I guess I told you my father always had little sayings about [things that] always had a little moral to them. I tell Karl I have little moral stories, too. One of the ones I like to tell Karl is: it's got to operate; if it doesn't operate, why you've got to do something about it. I said, it's no different than the Swede working down the street, and he was drunk and the Salvation Army fellow came along and tried to convert him and told him to work for Jesus, work for Jesus, and the Swede finally got tired of it and he said, "Well, I'm working for Johnny Thompson. Johnny Thompson pay me a dollar an hour. Jesus pay me $1.25 and I work for Jesus."

So that's the way this thing works. We're way wrong with our whole set-up in this world, valueing things. There ought to be units of labor, or units of something that values should be placed on instead of the dollar. You know you'd quit your job tomorrow and go over to another job if you can get ten cents more somewhere else. This is the way it works. That is, if you have stability and everything else that goes with it. I know I--we were talking about sales. I sell to California Wine Association.

Wente: California Wine Association pays me a half cent more than Lachman & Jacobi, I sell to California Wine Association. If Lachman & Jacobi pays me a half cent more than California Wine Association, I sell to them. So this is a cold, cold world. It's all based around that damned dollar. [Laughter]

Teiser: Since Repeal, the distribution system has entirely changed, has it not?

Wente: You mean with wines? Yes. A lot of that enters into--our transportation system is different. The city has moved to the country. Before the country always moved to the city. Nobody in the country did anything without it was dictated from the policy of the city. They had no way of moving their wines in, only on railroads. You wouldn't bottle out here in the country; couldn't get the glass out, and what have you. Now we have these rapid transits and we have these good highways and these immense big trucks that come right out here. We don't have to be on a railroad siding. While before, a winery was no good unless it was on a railroad siding. Today, why it doesn't mean anything. We can take the railroad and bring it to the winery.

We're having trouble right now. This sounds kind of again jumping, but it's taking too long for us to get our product to New York. See, we ship with Martini or Korbel or three or four wineries when the customer can't use a whole carload of Wente so he takes half a carload of Martini. Well, we start a car at Martini's and it stops here for loading. It takes a week, pretty near, to get that car down here, and then it fools around here and is switched around again, and it takes two to three weeks to get a car to New York this way, when piggy-back it ought to go through in five days. We're working on that right now, to see if we can't get piggy-back service. We had a carload that was lost. We loaded a full carload of Wente wines here three weeks ago, and we demanded heating service in it because the carload before got caught with some damage with cold, so the heating was on and nobody watched over it and the damned car burned up and so we lost it that way, and the other one before we lost it with cold stability.

Teiser: So, piggy-back you think is the answer?

Wente: Well, it goes through fast. Nobody cares any more. It used to be the railroads watched over you, too. Golly, you could come out here as an immigrant girl from Europe and they'd put a tag on you and the conductor would watch over you and see that you were delivered. My mother came that way from Germany. She had a tag tied to her, and when she got on the train, the conductor watched over her and saw that she was delivered to her uncle out in Oakland. She used to talk about this.

Teiser: When you ship this way with the other wineries, are you still selling direct from the winery to the wholesaler?

Wente: We, Wente Brothers and Martini have primary distributors. We have two. We have Parrott & Company west of the Rockies. We have "21" Brands east of the Rockies. They are our primary distributors. They service the wholesaler.

Teiser: And with these you have definite long-range arrangements? It isn't like selling either to Lachman & Jacobi or...

Wente: These are all finished products, with our labels on. When we sold to Lachman & Jacobi or to Ciocca-Lombardi, it lost all its identity and we bottled under their label. It didn't have any name on it at all. It was so much wheat in a sack.

Teiser: So this kind of distribution came in with your bottling your own?

Wente: Right. And this is what Mr. Wetmore said, it would take you 20 years to build up a brand. Versus two years to destroy it. That's just exactly what Schenley did with Cresta Blanca.

Teiser: Do you have a contractual arrangement with "21" Brands? You're tied to them pretty much?

Wente: Not necessarily tied to them. We have more or less of an agreement.

Teiser: Is this not the pattern of the good winemakers?

Wente: No. We will say that some of the wineries, Concannon's for instance, they are selling to wholesalers; they do not have primary distributors. They sell to a wholesaler in Los Angeles...[and others elsewhere]. But everything that we ship from here we bill to Parrott & Company or we bill "21" Brands. Even though it's delivered here in Livermore. The liquor distributor here in Livermore comes out and picks it up, but it's billed to Parrott & Company; Parrott & Company bills them. I can go fishing and I don't need to worry about collections. This little distributor could go broke and this would set you back quite a lot. They do our advertising, what little advertising--we do some ourselves but they take care of principally all the servicing of the wholesalers and advertising and see that they are properly handled.

Teiser: How did you have your present label made?

Wente: Well, that's a long story. We worked on that with Schoonmaker some first, and then we worked on it with different artists, and then we worked on it some. We worked through Schmidt Lithograph. Their artists worked on some of our labels.

Teiser: So you just worked and worked at it?

Wente: That's about it.

Teiser: It's a very attractive label. Isn't there a different color on the...

Wente: You know, I like some of our old labels the best. But even the cases, we changed the color of the outside. Again, people like a change for some reason or other. This is a funny thing, you know. Now this Wente Blanc de blanc wine. Out of curiosity everybody's trying it, and if we didn't do this we'd probably start falling backward. You're competing against yourself, but that's a lot of fun too. It's the old, old thought: if you stand still you soon start to go backward. And I guess that's true. That's what they told us when we went to school.

RECENT ADVANCES

Teiser: Going further into these different changes, are wines aged longer now than they were?

Wente: No. Our white wines a shorter period. The red wines, yes; we're aging longer in glass than we did. We age them in wood up to where we think they've reached their peak, then we put them in glass and let them lay in glass for a few years. But our white wines, we like to get them off young and fresh. I think it's proving too that this can be done. This old, old theory that wine gets better with age is being exploded awfully fast. This holds true with only some varieties, like the Cabernet Sauvignon and Pinot noir, but you also have a lot of spoilage by holding them over. You have bum corks and what have you, and leaky bottles here and there, and your loss is great. The corks we're getting today aren't as good as they used to be.

Teiser: I was about to ask you about the corks before Prohibition and now.

Wente: We've worked and worked and worked on this thing. We had good corks right after Repeal.

Teiser: Where were they coming from?

Wente: From France and Portugal and Algeria. And then we were getting much better corks than they were over in Europe. We were in better financial position. But as Germany got stronger and France got stronger financially, they got the selection of the good corks. We didn't get them, and so we kind of sat around and wondered what to do next. We paid as high as two cents and three cents a cork that was supposed to be extra first, and then we just decided we'd either have to go screw caps or something else so we came to this polyethylene deal.

Teiser: You are coming to that now?

Wente: No. This was ten years ago. We did come to this [showing a plastic cork], and we wanted it so you

Wente: could put a corkscrew in it and pull it like a corkscrew. You see this is designed so that you put it in and it comes level and you wouldn't notice the difference but what it's a cork. We started out with five rings at first, and we came down to nine rings finally, and then we thought we had it made. We spent a thousand dollars on the mold and what have you, and then we started to bottle a few cases here, and every time a cork salesman came in we said, "This will probably be your last order for us because you're giving us such junky corks that we can't afford to use them any more. We're going into polyethylene." Then they'd say, "Give us a try once more, give us a try once more." So we got better corks then for a while. So--there's a thousand-dollar cork!

Teiser: Was it practical?

Wente: Yes, it will work.

Teiser: Can you get a corkscrew into it?

Wente: Yes. From here.

Teiser: Oh, in this end.

Wente: Yes, this compresses as it goes into the bottle. We've got some wines that have been laying out there ten years [with the plastic corks] and still all right.

Teiser: Maybe you have an ace-in-the-hole then.

Wente: Well, you know, competition is the life of trade.

Teiser: There are some corks that are liminated, are there?

Wente: Yes, that's champagnes. We don't use them.

Teiser: I've even seen something that looked like pressed cork board, made of little granules of cork.

Wente: Well, sure. Cork is one of your principal materials for insulation. Before they ground up glass, all your refrigerators were cork and all your insulated cold rooms were done with cork.

Teiser: It seems to me I've seen some of that material used in wine corks.

Wente: Well, there's nothing wrong, I don't think. We'll eventually come to screw caps.

Teiser: It'll make it a lot easier for a woman to open a bottle.

Wente: Amazing. We're selling quite a lot of wines now at the airlines. And the American Airlines demands screw caps so the stewardess doesn't have to pull corks. And besides that she's got the closure right with her all the time. If she doesn't use up the bottle, she just closes it up for the next flight and it doesn't spoil on her so rapidly.

Teiser: How about aging it? Can you age wine...

Wente: Well, no. This is the sad part of it. You have to have corks pretty much for these red wines. With the younger white wines it works out very well. This Le Blanc de blanc has never been in wood. I guess I told you this. What we're selling now, Le Blanc de blanc, was made last October. With the proper installation, we've learned that we can make these wines, keep the flavor of the grape, if we can handle them young. We'd lost it before, because we had to stabilize it in wood and lay it away, and by that time we'd lose some of the flavors, and now this Le Blanc de blanc will go right out of the steel tanks into glass tanks into the bottle through two or three filterations of careful filtrations to take out the yeast and then we stabilize it in a cold room--cold tank.

Teiser: That is an advance in technology that I suppose no one would have believed 30 years ago.

Wente: That's right. Thirty years ago if you were an old wine connoisseur, you wouldn't even taste it; you'd say it can't be any good if it's that young. But here we are with our tax structure getting worse and worse, and they are just squeezing, squeezing, to get you higher and higher, and I don't know where things are going to go. It's got to come from somewhere. Now we've got to put our costs, whether it's taxes or corks or what have you, back

Wente: to the consumer. The consumer has to pay this or we've got to go out of business. And so it's a vicious circle you're living under today.

Teiser: As you point out, though, the young people are interested in dry wines and so they must be willing to pay for them.

Wente: Well everybody seems to have a lot of money. Personally I wonder where we're going to go. You can't live and borrow all your life.

GROWING GOOD WINE GRAPES

Teiser: Are your yields, your per-acre yields, higher than they were?

Wente: We're doing a better job culturing grapes outside, too, than we were. We have better equipment. We don't have as good help as we did, but we have everything else much better; we have better tractors and cultivators and spray materials. I had the spray man here today. We were talking about sulphuring, and we're using liquid sulphur instead of the dust. You can put it on so much easier and so much evener. As he pointed out to me, he said, "You know this spray rig that you paid three thousand dollars for, it's earned itself five times in the last two years by your sulphur control." This is what he said now.

Teiser: Do you believe it?

Wente: I don't know. Yes I do in a sense. I know that it's been a good investment. I'd hate to put it quite the way he puts it, that it's earned itself five times over.

Teiser: Do you fertilize the land in any different way than you did in your father's day?

Wente: Not too much, no. We do a better job of moisture control than father did. However, we are also depleting some of the minerals, metals, out of the

Wente: soil, the food contents. We do grow some cover crops, used for plowing under. We do put in some nitrogen each year. We try to keep the balance to food value in our soils because, after all, this is very important. In order to make anything good you've got to have well ripened fruit. It can't be starved for moisture and it shouldn't be starved for the principal plant foods like nitrogen, phosphoric acid, and so forth.

Teiser: Did your father irrigate?

Wente: We didn't have any water to irrigate with.

Teiser: When did you start irrigating here?

Wente: Oh, we started along in the 'thirties, and then we found that our vines were going backward, and then we analyzed the water and took it to the university and had it analyzed, and they all said that it was all right, didn't have any salt, no more than the tolerant amount.

Teiser: Did the university help solve the water problem?

Wente: No. It was boron. No, the university didn't know what boron was. And our wells were high in boron content here, so we had to go out--we spent a fortune here on well drilling and what have you. Just put down a hole and find it was high in boron and pull out, and put down another one and get over into another field and finally we got two pretty fair wells. Then we watered from there. Now we're getting water out of the tri-county water aqueduct.

Teiser: I see that you're using overhead sprinkers out here now. When did you start?

Wente: Just as soon as these sprinkers were available, we went to the overhead sprinkler system. You can't flood irrigate this gravelly land, because it's so uneven, and on the spots of gravel the water will disappear immediately, and the other spots won't receive any, so you get a good even distribution with the overhead sprinkling system.

Teiser: What did you use before?

Wente: Well, we furrowed and ran the water in the furrow and it wasn't very satisfactory. Now we're putting in a sprinkling line over in Monterey County. We're putting in 7600 sprinklers, permanent installation. Fifty-six miles of underground pipe, and 260 acres.

Teiser: These are these same kind of overhead sprinklers?

Wente: Yes, but these are portable ones that you see here. The other will be underground, the lines will be underground.

Teiser: Have you tried fogging for heat and cold protection?

Wente: Yes, seriously thought of frost protection, but not for heat protection. Yes, we've given that a great deal of thought. We haven't enough water here. We'd like to do that here. Down there we don't need it. We're out of the frost belt.

Teiser: I'm about to be out of tape. I have just a little more to ask on what you're talking about and going outside this valley. Could I go out and get another tape and just ask you a few more questions? Or are you running out of time?

Wente: No, not exactly. How long will it take?

Teiser: Can I have twenty minutes more? I wanted to ask you, you said irrigated land did not grow good grapes, or something of the sort...

Wente: I'd like to explain this, to the best of my ability. We were starved at times for moisture. If we had a good wet season, around 15 to 24 inches of rain, we could have a nice, well-rounded, ripened fruit, if we didn't crop them too heavily.

Then, when we got eight inches of rain or less, we had a shrivelled-up, dried-up fruit which was high in acid and didn't have any sugar because it didn't have a chance to mature. But we irrigated to bring moisture content up so that we'd have 18 to 26 inches of water per acre and we could then grow a nice, well-rounded fruit. And this is what we are trying to do.

Wente: Now, you can go to the extreme by irrigating too much and putting on a foot of water per acre like they do in the San Joaquin Valley, down in the lower end where they grow table grapes, to get them a size to get the raisin grapes, ten, 15 or 20 tons to the acre, so that they could make it profitable.

Well, we're not after tonnage, not heavy tonnage, of course. We're after well-rounded, ripened fruit that has a good balance and sugar-acid ratio, and from that we can make good wines. And if we have the well-rounded, ripened fruit, why--we'll have a variation in seasons. Some seasons will be better than others. The way we're operating here now, we're putting on a certain amount of moisture, why we can control everything pretty well.

Have I explained myself?

Teiser: Yes. I noticed that some of the vines were on wires. Is this something that you are doing now...

Wente: Yes--we put them on wires because we're equipped now with equipment that goes in and out in between the rows so our cultivation is all done one way. Before we had to cross-cultivate to take out between the vines. But now hydraulic rams on the tractors have in and out plows. They just go right up to the vine, and then the trigger hits the vine and with that the plow hops out and as the trigger passes the vine, the plow hops in again, right behind the vine. It's a very interesting piece of machinery.

It's quite well designed and it's worth looking at sometime. You ought to take some pictures to see this come along the row, and it's plowing in the next row to you. [Laughter]

Teiser: Does putting the vines on wires improve the grapes?

Wente: You can spread the fruit out and you can expose them to better leafage coverage. It has a lot of advantages. You can bring them up a little higher, which gives you better ventilation underneath which gives you frost protection and also mildew protection. When the leaves drag to the ground and close off air circulation; your mildew sperms grow very rapidly in the closed area. If they have an air circulation

Wente: you have better mildew control. And you also have better frost control if you have air circulation. So we like to keep them up about 42 inches above the ground.

Teiser: Are they picked more quickly when they're on wires?

Wente: Yes, pickers like them too. The "mama ladies" can go along and pick these grapes very easily when they're up three feet in the air rather than to stoop over. It's quite an advantage to a picker. It really is.

Teiser: When did this start?

Wente: Well, it's nothing new. We've done this--there are two methods on the wires. We use what they call the "cordon" method; that's taking the old wood and putting it along the wire and then you leave the spurs off of that. Or you can use the "cane" method, which they are using with the Thompson Seedless, and put new wood on the wire each year. We put the old wood on the wire and leave it there, then we prune the new wood off of the old wood.

Teiser: Does it make it easier to prune, then?

Wente: It makes it easier to prune. It makes it easier to sucker. It makes an easier culture all the way through, and gives us this added protection which I was speaking of--frost protection and circulation of air for mildew control.

Teiser: Everything has advanced a little, hasn't it?

Wente: Yes, we're getting smarter all the time, really. We don't know how much capacity we have or how far we can go. [Laughter] I can remember when we went out here and worked all day with one old mule out in the vineyard, and then we got up to two mules, and then got up to four mules. Then my father said, "You sell those mules and buy a tractor and you'll go broke." So I sold the mules and bought the tractor, and I worked and worked and worked. And Pop was always saying, "I told you" every time the tractor would break down. This was when tractors were in their infancy and you had to be a mechanic with it, you know. You tried and tried to get it

Wente: to work. And finally they made and sold us better tractors.

Now they're so fine that they are really a pleasure to operate. They're expensive though. Gosh sake, the big tractors that we're using now. We're paying sixteen, eighteen thousand dollars apiece for them.

When I was a boy, if you have sixteen or eighteen thousand dollars you could retire. You wouldn't have to work any more. Now you spend it on one lousy tractor, and you've got dozens of them around. I wonder sometimes how crazy one can get? [Laughter] This is what goes through your mind. Gee whiz, if I sold all these tractors, I could go fishing all the time and I wouldn't need to worry about mechanics or anything else.

Teiser: When did you decide to go outside of this valley for the first time?

Wente: Oh, we've given this considerable thought for the last twelve years, when Livermore started to grow and the atomic research came in here and the evaluations of the land became high, and it looked like we only had a few years--maybe only five years--or life here, potential life, before we were taxed too high beyond our ability to get it off the ground. Anything that goes beyond--we talk about the dollar again--pretty vicious circle. If you can't make it you're going to lose it so we felt that we'd better go somewhere, and so we decided we'd look around the country. We went to Healdsburg and the Mother Lode country which we were talking about earlier, where Mr. Sheean was superintendant up there in Sacramento. I looked them all over. Napa and all over.

And then we went down and looked at this country down toward Hollister where Almaden is, and went on over to the Salinas Valley and saw the advantages there because they have the earth that has the calcium formation in it and the rocks and everything else that went with it, and so we felt that this was just the thing for our white grapes. So we bought this piece of property down there.

Teiser: Do you expect to buy more outside of the area?

Wente: Not until we're crowded out of here in Livermore. When we're crowded out of here in Livermore, then we'll buy some more in that immediate neighborhood, we think.

Teiser: What year did you buy that?

Wente: In 1962, 1963.

Teiser: I think you said you had some other crops planted there now.

Wente: Not now. We got it all into grapes. Here is a picture of the location. That's when we were first putting it in. The one up above shows last year's green leaves. Well, this gives you a topographical view of it here, this canyon and behind, here, and showing the Arroyo Seco.

Teiser: How has it proved out, so far?

Wente: Well, we're very much elated over it.

Teiser: Is the quality comparable to this?

Wente: We think so. A little different flavor. We'll give you a little change-over, you know, a little at a time (I'm speaking of the connoisseurs) and we'll blend the two together for a few years, because they have a little different flavor, and you're used to Livermore flavor now, and now we're giving you the Blanc de blanc which is half from down there and half from Livermore. Maybe in two years from now, the Le Blanc de blanc will come three-quarters from down there, and then five years from now it will all come from down there and you'll never know the difference. It's something you know, like, you start with low heeled shoes and pretty soon you know you're up on high heeled shoes. [Laughter]

Teiser: Lifting the calf...

Wente: Lifting the calf over the fence.

Teiser: Are they different in ways that you can analyze?

Wente: Yes. I don't think it's as high in albumenates down there as we are here in Livermore. We're exceptionally high in albumens here in Livermore, for some reason or other. It's nitrogen here I think that gives us the albumens the flavor over here in Livermore. We are, ourselves, a little high in nitrogen. However, we have some of this calcium lime formation down there which the French maintain is the ideal soil for champagne growing. This is what they have in Rheims, France. This ground looks very much like the Rheims, France, district.

Oh, I think it's O.K., really, or I wouldn't have done it. You take and throw a half a million dollars into a piece of property and put it into grapes and wires and labor and what have you, and you say, "Well, gee whiz, five hundred thousand dollars at seven per cent its thirty-five thousand dollars a year and half of that Uncle Sam will take for taxes and so that leaves me sixteen thousand. I can fish all the year around for that."

Teiser: This ties in with another thing I was wondering about. Can you grow other varieties of grapes over there than you can here and have you tried it?

Wente: We've tried everything down there that we're growing here. We don't know which ones yet, which varieites, we favor the most. I think probably--it's a little cooler down there and I think we can do a better job on the red wines down there than we can here. However, time will tell. I'm going to give it to you slowing--a mixture. One quarter first, then a half and then three quarters. [Laughter]

Teiser: The general question I was going to ask was: How have you decided over the years which grape grows best in which area? This seems to me almost like interpreting music on the violin--like a virtuoso performance.

Wente: Well, very much the same. It's a trial and error, and you keep practicing, practicing, practicing. This is about the whole thing. You make a cake, for instance, you try and try and try. You get a little more of a perfectionist with every cake you bake. If you really work at it and eliminate all

Wente: your errors and pick up all your perfectionists, you're bound to get better. It's like playing the piano. Eventually you can play without the music. And with the tasting of these wines, we try and try. We pick them at certain stages. Then we take the tests. The sugar content--the Balling test on them. We'll take the total acid test and other tests that go with it, and when we find we got a sugar-acid ratio--why this is it. It's just that simple.

Teiser: Have you discarded many varieties?

Wente: Oh, sure. There are some of the commoner varieties that came up here in the early days and we just--oh, the country's full of them. You can go through the history of Livermore here, and it's pitiful some of the varieties that were planted here. They had grapes running out of their ears. Big heavy bearers like the old Mission, gosh, a big old clumsy vine that grew lots of grapes and no character. Today, Mataro and many of these others. We are not even attempting to grow them down there. We are picking up the Zinfandel again, though, and then planting it down there, to try it. We've got some Cabernet Sauvignon we are going to try down there. As far as Cabernet Sauvignon here in Livermore, it's just too hot for it up here. We've never had any success making a Cabernet here in Livermore, too great a success, although the Concannons do quite well. We never have.

We've done very well with our Pinot Noir and the Beaujolais here in Livermore, but we can do better down there. I know darn well we can because it's cooler down there. We have that little limestone with us down there, too.

Teiser: Will you continue trying new things here, too?

Wente: Well, you always try something new all the time, don't you?

INDEX - Ernest A. Wente

Adams, Dr. Charles 3
Adams, Leon 69
Almaden Winery 73, 74
Alta Vista Wine Company 29
Altschul, Dr. Joseph 10-11
Amerine, Dr. Maynard A. 20, 38

Baccigaluppi, Harry 38
Bank of America 69
Bartlett, W. P. 28
Beaulieu Vineyard 20-23, 54, 60, 66
Berg, Harold 75
Bernard, Dr. George 4
Bertiu & Lepori 29
Bioletti, Professor Frederic T. 17
Bonnet, Leon O. 6-7, 38
Bowen, Charles E. 14
Bundschu, Carl 17
Busch, Dr. Louis 4
Busse, Frank A. 64-65

Caddow, Harry 20, 69
California Grape Grower 67
California Grape Growers Association 16, 67
California Wine Association 76
Canziani, Bruno 26, 52
Chaix & Bernard 29
Chateau Bellevue 9
Chateau d'Yquem 5, 6, 16
Chauche & Bon 29, 37
Chevalier & Company 29
Ciocca-Lombardi 29, 78
Concannon, James 28
Concannon, Joseph Jr. (Joe) 30
Concannon Winery 79, 91
Cordova Vineyards 17, 67
Crane, George B. 28
Cresta Blanca winery 10-11, 14-15, 20, 36, 64, 68, 73-75, 78
Critchfield, Burke 69-70
Cruess, Dr. William V. (Bill) 2, 46, 50

Daniel, John Jr. 67-68
deLatour, Georges 20-22, 63, 65-66
Detjeus, Robert 53
De Turk, I. 29
Duvall, Alexander 9-10, 37

Edwards, Col. George C. 11

Ferrario, Ernest 10
Finkes Widow, A. 25, 28, 36
Fisher Packing Company 28
Franz and Fuchs 28
Fruit Industries, Ltd. 68

Garbini, Frank 52
Giannini, A. P. 70
Gibson, David J. 10
Golden Gate International Exposition 19-20
Grau, Edwin A. 18
Greystone Winery 18
Grieve, Bill 1
Guasti, Secondo 16
Gundlach, Jacob 17
Gundlach-Bundschu Co. 17, 21, 25, 28

Hagemann, Edwin E. 53
Hagemann, Mrs. Edwin E. (Hilma Wente) 24, 53
Haraszthy, Arpal and Company 28
Harwig, Dr. Clarence M. 2
Hayes, Timothy 28
Hecke, George 32
Hoelscher, William 29, 36
Husmann, Fred 17
Husmann, Professor George 17, 32

Inglenook Winery 68, 73
Italian Swiss Colony 25, 29, 73-74

Johnson, Lucien B. 15, 20, 64

Kirkman, Albert 26, 52
Krug, Charles 3, 18
Krug Winery 68
Kruger, Adele 26, 52

Lachman & Jacobi 25, 28-29, 43, 76, 78
Lanza, Horace O. 38
Lichine, Alexis 67
Livermore, Robert 39
Los Amigos Vineyard 18
Lur Saluces, Marquis de 5-6

Martini, Agostino 12-13
Martini, Louis M. 13-14, 63, 78
Martini, Louis P. 12
Marvel, Tom 66
Masson, Paul (Winery) 16, 73
Mel, Louis 5, 16
Montpelier Nursery (France) 6, 38
Morrow, A. R. 68, 76

Napa and Sonoma Wine Company 18-19, 21, 27, 29, 37, 47, 64-65
Napa-Sonoma Wine and Brandy Company 26
National Distillers 73-74
Niebaum, Captain Gustave 9

Olivina Winery 9-10, 37
Oterson, Herman 4, 29
Overland Transfer & Freight 28

Panama Pacific International Exposition 15-18
Parrott & Company 78-79
phylloxera 31-35
Priber, Emil C. 18, 64
Prohibition 60-63 and passim
Prorate 69-70

Rossi, Edmund A. 16-17, 20-21
Rossi, Pietro C. 17
Rossi, Robert D. 16-17
Ruby Hill Winery 10

Schenley Industries 15, 73, 78
Schmidt Lithograph Co. 79
Schoonmaker, Frank 66, 79
Schween, Will 5
Sheehan, Edgar M. (Ed) 17, 67
Smith, Julius Paul 9-10
Stoll, Horatio 16, 67

Tarpey, Paul 13-14
tourne 56, 63
Trautwein, Barbara See Wente, Barbara Trautwein
"21" Brands 78-79

Union Wine Company 29
United Vintners 73
University of California at Davis 1-2, 6, 50

Vienna Vineyard 10
Viticulture Department, U.S. Dept. of Agriculture 31-32

Wagoner, H.B. 28
Wente, Barbara Trautwein (Mrs. Carl H.) 4, 24, 78
Wente, Carl F. 11, 18, 24, 28, 51, 54, 56, 70
Wente, Carl Heinrich 3-5, 8-0, 11-13, 18-19, 21-22, 24-28, 31, 36-37, 38, 45, 47, 54-55, 57, 64-65, 67, 76, 83, 87
Wente, Carolyn 24
Wente, Mrs. Ernest A. (Bess) 58
Wente, Frieda 24
Wente, Herman L. 5-6, 12, 16, 18, 20, 22, 24, 27, 29, 37, 50-55, 59, 66-69
Wente, Mrs. Herman L. 58
Wente, Hilma See Hagemann, Mrs. Edwin E.
Wente, Karl L. 12, 29-30, 52-53
Wente, May 24
Werner, Edwin P. 18
Wetmore, Charles 7, 14-15, 69, 78
Wetmore, Clarence 6, 14-15, 20
Wetmore-Bowen Co. 14
Winedale Company 29
Wine Grape Growers Association 17
Wine Institute 16, 20, 33, 68-69
Wines and Vines 67
Winkler, Dr. A. J. 7, 20, 30, 38

Wines Mentioned in the Interview

Blanc de blanc, 79, 83, 89

Cabernet Sauvignon, 80
Charbono, 28
Chardonnay, 7
Chateau d'Yquem, 47
Chateau Sémillon, 46-47
Colombard, 27

Folle blanche, 27

Golden Chasselas, 27
Grey Riesling, 7

Hock, 37

Mourestal, 38

Neuchâtel, 27

Pinot blanc, 38
Pinot Chardonnay, 38
Pinot noir, 80

Riesling, 7-8

Sauterne, 7, 21-23, 47, 64
Sauvignon blanc, 7, 38, 75
Sémillon, 22, 38, 47

Ugni blanc, 38

Zinfandel, 8

Grape Varieties Mentioned in the Interview

Alicante, 41

Beaujolais, 91
Burger, 5, 37

Cabernet Sauvignon
Cabrignane, 49, 62
Charbono, 4

Chenin blanc, 39
Colombard, 4, 5, 7, 27

French colombard, 5

Gamay Beaujolais, 39
Grey Riesling, 5, 7

Mataro, 4, 39, 91
Mission, 35, 39-40, 91

Pinot blanc, 39
Pinot Chardonnay, 39
Pinot noir, 39, 91

Riesling, 7-8

Saint-Émilion, 6, 38
Sauvignon blanc, 5, 41, 62
Sauvignon vert, 5, 7
Sémillon, 5, 7, 41, 62

Thompson Seedless, 39-41, 87

Ugni blanc, 6, 38-39

White Riesling, 5

Zinfandel, 4, 39-41, 62, 91

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